

**CULTURAL CAPITAL AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: A MIXED-METHODS
STUDY ON THE PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS, FAMILIES, AND SCHOOL STAFF
OF THREE BROAD AREAS THAT MAY IMPACT STUDENT LEARNING DURING
MIDDLE SCHOOL**

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Students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, referred to as the priority students, have historically struggled to maintain the same academic achievement as students from more advantaged backgrounds. Within the Panther Unified School District, between 40-49% of students qualify as coming from low SES backgrounds. These priority students have historically underperformed when compared to other students from more advantaged backgrounds within the district. The academic struggles of priority students are often increased during times of transition in their K-12 educational career (transition from elementary to middle and middle to high school). The Panther Unified School District graduating class of 2021 has 55 priority students that were in their final year of middle school at the time of this study. This class of students was investigated using a mixed-methods approach to determine which priority students experienced high and low academic achievement in their final two years of middle school and how three broad areas may have influenced their learning in middle school. Methods used included secondary data analysis, a focus group and a learning inventory activity that used a fishbone

diagram to identify perceptions and root causes of the school, family and student factors that may have impacted the learning of the priority students during middle school. This study specifically sought to understand how family, school and student factors may have a positive and/or negative influence on the learning of the priority students over their final two years of middle school. Findings indicated that a majority of the priority students were not on track for career or college readiness, that positive and sustained teacher and adult relationships may be a great source of motivation and support for students from low SES backgrounds, and that many of the priority students lacked an ability to act as a self-change agent. This study suggests the value of identifying staff advocates for priority students within schools and that through teacher professional development on understanding the academic and social-emotional needs of many students from low SES backgrounds schools may leverage valuable staff and community resources to improve the academic performance of priority students.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The relationship between student background characteristics and academic achievement has long been a focus of researchers, practitioners, policy makers and educational institutions. James Coleman's federally funded examination of educational opportunity serves as a landmark analysis by identifying that student background characteristics, such as family and community socioeconomic status (SES), may be major contributors to academic achievement gaps between poor and minority children and other children from more financially advantaged backgrounds (Coleman, 1966). Since Coleman's report, many studies have identified that academic achievement gaps between students from poor and more economically advantaged backgrounds may be substantial and that students from lower SES backgrounds consistently score well below national academic averages (Bodovski, 2010; Covay & Carbonara, 2010; DiMaggio, 1982; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Lareau, 1987).

Family SES levels may contribute to both the way teachers view students and form expectations for students and how students employ their own intellectual and cultural resources to meet standard school expectations (Bourdieu, 1986; Meo, 2011). Due to the social relationships that exist within schools, competitive systems often form that allow students to draw unevenly on cultural resources to meet common school expectations (Bourdieu, 1993). In comparison to students from higher SES backgrounds, students from working class and lower SES backgrounds often have lower levels of self-esteem, motivation, and awareness of how to

advocate for themselves across contexts that result in lower levels of academic achievement during their educational experiences (Holland & Andre, 1987; McDonough, 1997). Furthermore, expectations for appropriate school behavior and academic performance often conflict between the families of students from low SES backgrounds and their educational institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Despite these potential challenges, many students from low SES backgrounds can and do obtain positive academic outcomes at various levels of the educational system (Broh, 2002; Killgo, 2010; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014). Identifying the factors that support educational success for students from low SES backgrounds within Panther Unified School District and providing professional development to educational practitioners is the focus of this problem of practice.

1.1 PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

This problem of practice pertains to learning more about the perceptions of students, school staff and families of three broad areas that may impact student learning during their final two years of middle school. The perceptions of these stakeholders was explored to identify their beliefs of how families, schools and student factors may have a positive and/or negative influence on student learning over a group of students from low SES backgrounds during their final two years of middle school. Research focused on a group of students from low SES backgrounds, herein referred to as the priority students, within a small suburban and partially rural school district in southwestern Pennsylvania that will be identified as Panther Unified School District. Students were considered a priority student if they qualified for free or reduced lunch during both their 7th and 8th grade school years. A primary concern within this inquiry setting is that many students

from low SES backgrounds often fail to understand and/or complete academic activities that are common to all students. These academic activities include but are not limited to homework, tests, quizzes, individual and group projects as well as assignments provided by teachers that students should complete during class. As many students within this setting fail to engage with and complete academic activities and also transition through different levels of the school system, their learning suffers and achievement gaps between students widen. Addressing the mismatch that exists between the academic expectations of Panther Unified teachers and what many of their students believe to be important is a primary responsibility within this setting. The purpose of this study was therefore to conduct a focused examination into the priority population of students within Panther Unified School District. Learning more about the perceptions that these students, their families and educators have of factors that may have a positive and/or negative influence on their learning will provide valuable insight into future policy, curriculum, program and professional development initiatives within Panther Unified School District and may be useful knowledge to share with other area educational practitioners to consider within their own professional settings.

Academically, many Panther Unified School District students fail to consistently complete “in-class” assignments and homework or properly plan and prepare for larger academic tasks. Regardless of SES background, students at Panther Area Middle School also struggle with the notion of how to advocate for their academic needs (Panther Unified School District, 2015). Consistent with the research presented within this dissertation, many students from low SES backgrounds also achieve very well on academic activities as they transition throughout Panther Unified School District. To learn more about this problem of practice, this study surveyed the academic landscape for a grade-level of students from low SES backgrounds within Panther

Unified School District. Student grade-point-averages (GPA) were analyzed for all of the priority students' core academic classes. Within Panther Area Middle School, core academic classes are considered to be their English Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies and Science classes. Through analyzing student GPA's for their entire 7th grade school year and the first nine weeks of their 8th grade school year, I was able to identify a group of priority students that have shown consistent high academic achievement and a group of priority students that have shown consistent low academic achievement during their final years of middle school. Within the context of this study, high achievement was considered to be a core academic GPA average of a 3.0 or higher and low achievement was considered to be a core academic GPA average of a 2.5 or lower during both the 7th grade school year and first nine weeks of the priority students' 8th grade school year. By analyzing the priority students' core GPA, a distribution of academic achievement among the target grade-level of students was then developed. A 3.0 GPA threshold was used as a primary indicator of academic success due to recent emphasis placed by both local and college and university guidelines on students maintaining a 3.0 GPA or higher to be considered on track for college and/or career readiness (American College Testing, 2015; Hein et al., 2013; National Forum on Education Statistics, 2015; Panther Unified School District, 2015).

A major challenge within this setting is helping all students better understand and meet the expectations of their teachers while also helping school staff understand and respond to the needs and challenges of having a large percentage of students from low SES backgrounds. When the academic expectations of educators and students is closely aligned and understood, students are often rewarded with higher grades and engagement with their educators and fellow classmates (DiMaggio, 1982; Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). However, students often come to school with different intellectual resources that contribute to both the way teachers view

students and form expectations and also how students use their developed intellectual resources to meet the expectations of their teachers (Bourdieu, 1986; Meo, 2011). To conduct inquiry into this problem of practice at Panther Unified School District, a sample group of students coming from low SES backgrounds was identified and is referred to as the priority students within this dissertation. The priority students were selectively chosen based on recent knowledge of their grades, behaviors and attitudes and reflect students who have academically performed very well and also students that exhibited academic concerns. This problem of practice focused on understanding how student learning during middle school may be impacted by school, family and student factors. Within the context of this study, learning was identified as not only the accumulation of academic knowledge but also as improved understanding of how to successfully navigate oneself through social situations and institutions (i.e. the ability to work with others as a member of a group and the ability to enable resources within institutions to support advancement). This definition of learning was provided to students, school staff and parents as they completed the primary research activity of this study and was based on current literature in relationship to the academic achievement of students and cultural capital theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979; Khan, 2012; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Lareau, 1987; Panther Unified School District; Zink & Dyson, 2009). Through the course of inquiry into this problem of practice, this study sought to gain knowledge and insight that may help to develop intervention programs and professional learning opportunities that address these issues and help to improve the academic achievement of all students within the district. In order to develop intervention programs and professional learning opportunities, learning more about how the students, school staff and families perceive the potential impact of the aforementioned factors on student learning is very important.

Cultural capital theory, as described through the research of Pierre Bourdieu, guided the theoretical perspective of my inquiry. All inquiry into this problem of practice therefore searched to gain understanding of how cultural capital may affect the priority group of students at Panther Unified School District and how opportunities may be created to enhance the cultural capital of all students and therefore improve learning. The research presented in this dissertation emphasizes that students coming from low SES backgrounds are often at risk for having a lower amount of cultural capital. Through gaining an understanding of these issues, cultural capital may be developed in the priority students within Panther Unified School District and knowledge and skills may be developed among the district's practitioners that may help to close academic achievement gaps between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Cultural capital should be understood, based on Bourdieu and Passeron's (1979) interpretation, as key dispositions, knowledge, skills and familiarity with how social institutions function that support advancement in society.

1.2 INQUIRY QUESTIONS

The majority of the literature identifies that students from low SES backgrounds often struggle to maintain the same level of academic achievement and attainment as students that come from higher SES families. However, some literature as well as my professional experience both indicate that many students from low SES backgrounds do actually maintain high levels of academic achievement and attainment. The following inquiry questions enabled this study to examine issues of cultural capital, as defined previously within this paper, for the priority group of students within Panther Unified School District. Specifically, these questions enabled this

study to examine students, their families, and school staff perceptions of each stakeholder's potential impact on learning as these students complete middle school. This study used Pierre Bourdieu's framework of cultural capital as a disposition that students acquire from their upbringing that either aligns or conflicts their attitude and behavior with the expectations of their school system and educators (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979; Lareau, 2015). The following questions guided inquiry into this problem of practice:

- 1) What is the distribution of academic achievement among the priority students at Panther Area Middle School? Amongst the priority students, which students consistently experience academic success and which students consistently struggle to achieve academic success?
- 2) What are the perceptions of the priority students of the school, family and self-related factors that may contribute to a positive or negative impact on their learning?
- 3) How do the parents of the priority students describe factors (see above) that may contribute to a positive or negative learning experience for their children?
- 4) How do teachers, administrators, and other school staff describe factors (see above) that may contribute to a positive or negative learning experience for the priority students?

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The struggle for educational equality and opportunity is deeply embedded within the history of American society. From the Reconstruction era through the present day, minority students and students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds have historically, on average, struggled to obtain equal educational outcomes and attainment when compared to other students from non-minority and more advantaged backgrounds. In the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, Professor James Coleman and his colleagues released a landmark, federally funded report investigating student achievement entitled *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. Better known as the Coleman Report (1966), findings revealed, among many issues, that student background characteristics such as family and community socioeconomic status may be major contributors to academic achievement gaps between poor and minority children and other children from more financially advantaged backgrounds. Since the release of the Coleman Report, numerous research studies have focused on issues related to student academic achievement gaps. These studies have consistently identified that academic achievement gaps between poor and advantaged students are substantial and that students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds consistently score well below national academic averages (Bodovski, 2010; Covay & Carbonara, 2010; DiMaggio, 1982; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Lareau, 1987). For purposes of this review of literature, this study considered low socioeconomic status (SES) to refer to those students that qualify for free or reduced lunch.

2.1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework used to guide this review of literature focused on identifying how the available literature defines cultural capital and how previous research has examined the relationship between students' level of cultural capital and their family socioeconomic status. Inquiry into the existing literature attempted to identify the relationship between cultural capital and academic achievement and attainment in American public schools, specifically during major transition periods in students' K-12 educational careers. Furthermore, the existing literature was surveyed and analyzed to learn more on how cultural capital may have either a positive or negative influence on student learning in relation to school, family and self-related factors that may impact student learning. Each of these concepts has a section within this dissertation's review of literature; however, the self-related factors that may impact student learning are embedded within each section due to the similarity and interwoven nature of each concept within this dissertation.

2.2 CULTURAL CAPITAL

The concept of cultural capital became widely publicized through the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his examination of the French educational system's grandes ecoles.¹ Bourdieu argued that material wealth (economic capital) is not the only benefit that adults in upper class societies pass on to their offspring. Rather, citizens that accumulate economic capital also pass on cultural

¹ The grandes ecoles are higher education establishments within France that are not considered to be within the public university system. Student admission to the grandes ecoles is determined largely through competitive rankings on national examinations focused on oral and written language skills.

capital to their offspring. Bourdieu's (1977) original descriptions of cultural capital focused on various forms of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that upper class families pass on to their offspring to help them maintain financial and academic advantage over children from lower social class backgrounds. Bourdieu's examination of the grandes ecoles and description of cultural capital continued to focus research studies on the advantages that family socioeconomic status may have on a child's academic performance. The concept of cultural capital has also been analyzed since Bourdieu's original descriptions. For instance, cultural capital has also been defined as "Property that middle and upper class families transmit to their offspring which substitutes for or supplements the transmission of economic capital, as a means of maintaining class status and privilege across generations" (McDonough, 1997).

In *The Inheritors*, Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) claim that the social and cultural resources of a child's family life shape academic success in that neutral academic standards are often laden with specific cultural class resources acquired at home. Students from higher class backgrounds enter school with key social and cultural cues that students from working and lower class backgrounds do not possess (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Furthermore, the educational system reproduces the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among classes by transmitting and requiring the cultural capital of the dominant social class within its society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). According to Bourdieu's (1977) original theoretical framework, cultural capital is the key resource that students from lower SES backgrounds need to successfully navigate educational institutions without further distancing themselves from the academic outcomes achieved by their peers from middle and upper-class families.

Since Bourdieu's study of the grandes ecoles, many researchers have documented ways in which the concept of cultural capital either inhibits or accelerates one's educational

achievement and life chances. Lareau (2015) defined cultural capital as “skills individuals inherit that can be translated into different forms of value as people move through different institutions” (p. 4). Lareau’s publication of findings from a 20-year ethnographic study indicate that the childrearing strategies of working-class and poor families typically do not comply with the expectations of educators and educational institutions. Furthermore, middle-class young adults acquire key cultural knowledge through their upbringing that students from working-class and poor backgrounds do not in three key areas: 1) knowledge of the “rules of the game” of how institutions work; 2) a sense of entitlement to ask for help when facing difficulty; 3) getting educational and other institutions to serve their needs and difficulties. Cultural knowledge, defined as “facts, information, skills, and familiarity with social processes of how institutions work,” is leveraged by middle and upper class students to obtain academic power and resources within educational institutions (Lareau, 2015, p. 2). Cultural capital comes from acquired dispositions and is interactive based on knowledge of how to behave in social situations. For students from poor and working class backgrounds, the embodied knowledge required to move up the scale in social hierarchies is largely absent due to a deficit in cultural capital that is congruent with the expectations of formal institutions (Khan, 2012; Lareau, 2009).

2.3 CULTURAL CAPITAL AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Family SES and the resulting impact on students’ levels of academic performance has been examined at length within educational research. Factors such as but not limited to race, culture, geographic location, single or two parent home, ancestral family SES, parent educational attainment, and community SES have been linked and examined in relationship to student

academic achievement when analyzing the impacts of SES. For purposes of this problem of practice, the literature that was reviewed was narrowed to include scholarly articles that focused on the SES of students' immediate family and that of their local community. This focus resulted in SES analysis that minimized the field of scholarly research to those articles that primarily identified SES with a family's level of economic wealth and educational attainment and to those articles that focused on a particular community's median family income.

The SES of a family has been identified as one of the strongest and most accurate predictors of both a student's level of academic achievement and attainment (Barr, 2015; Lareau, 2015). When analyzing the impacts of family SES on student academic achievement, both large scale and smaller studies and analyses have consistently found a reciprocal relationship between family SES and student academic achievement and attainment (Barr, 2015; Bodovski, 2010; Coleman, 1966; DiMaggio, 1982; Eagle, 1989; Lareau, 2015; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). These studies have found that SES levels have a relationship towards factors such as but not limited to homework completion, time spent preparing for academic tasks, grades, relationships with school staff, performance on standardized tests, high school drop-out rates, college acceptance, and student confidence toward academic task completion. To determine the relationship between family SES and a student's cultural capital, it is important to remember that cultural capital is defined within this paper, based on Bourdieu and Passeron's interpretation, as "key dispositions, knowledge, skills and familiarity with how social institutions function that support advancement in society."

Through using the aforementioned definition of cultural capital, existing literature has identified several areas that have a relationship with the support of student advancement in social institutions, such as American schools, to the SES levels of their families and communities.

Perhaps one of the more important concepts that link family SES to student advancement in schools is the notion that social class may often provide parents and/or guardians with unequal resources to support their children with academic expectations and demands (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Barr, 2015; Lareau, 1987; Lareau, 2015). These studies indicate that parents from higher SES levels often are more equipped with dispositions and skills that are conducive towards helping students meet the expectations of their educators. As already identified within this paper, when the expectations of students and educators are closely aligned, students are often rewarded with higher grades and understanding of academic concepts. Conversely, parents from lower SES levels often do not have the knowledge and skills to support their children at as successful and consistent of a level as parents from higher SES levels (Bodovski, 2010; DiMaggio, 1982). Students that qualify as coming from a low SES background often do not enter school with the same expectations, dispositions or skills as many of their peers from more affluent backgrounds.

Community and school SES have also been linked to individual student academic achievement and attainment. Students that attend schools with higher percentages of middle class family composition often have more knowledge on the “rules of the game” regarding how to earn positive grades than students that attend schools with higher percentages of economically challenged families (Lareau, 2015). These rules of the game impact the ways students prepare for assignments, participate in class, advocate for their academic needs, their level of academic self-efficacy and their motivation to complete assignments (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011, Lareau, 2015). The impact of community SES on student academic outcomes has also been linked to teacher expectations for students, the rigor of school courses and assignments, and students’

feelings of safety while at school (Killgo, 2010; Reynolds, Fisher & Cavil, 2012; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

The research of James Coleman (1961) in the *Adolescent Society* and Coleman Report (1966) signified a need for school leaders and researchers to examine the issues behind why students from low SES and minority backgrounds struggle to obtain equal academic achievement compared to their more affluent and non-minority peers. From these two Coleman studies, a variety of research analyses were completed to better understand how SES may impact student academic achievement and attainment. Pertaining to the focus of this research, literature reveals that family SES may impact students' academic grades, social and personality factors as well as self-esteem, race relations, involvement in political and social activity, educational aspirations, and feelings of control over one's life (Holland & Andre, 1987). Many studies initiated since Coleman's research have also analyzed massive, longitudinal research such as the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999 (ECLS-K), and the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002). Analyses of these studies have revealed that by improving the cultural knowledge of the aforementioned characteristics, families and schools may leverage academic power and resources that improve students' ability to navigate educational institutions and mainstream society (Broh, 2002; Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; Holland & Andre, 1987; Jordan, 1999; Lareau, 2015). Similarly, family SES may also impact disadvantaged students' ability to succeed at the "hidden curriculum" of schools. The hidden curriculum of schools may be defined loosely as the expectations of educators that students follow all classroom and school rules, that students give their best effort at all times, and that students ask for help when they do not understand what is being asked of them (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010).

The literature presented thus far clearly identifies a relationship between a student's family SES level and their own cultural capital. This relationship is best described by stating that students from lower SES backgrounds and communities often have lower levels of cultural capital to support their advancement towards higher academic outcomes and attainment. As students have higher levels of cultural capital, critical school accountability measures and outcomes may be earned more often at a higher level and students will likely feel more connected to school staff and their school environment (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Holland & Andre, 1987; Jordan, 1999). The relationship between students' family and school SES levels and their own level of cultural capital merit a more thorough understanding of how cultural capital may impact academic achievement as students complete their K-12 educational careers.

2.4 FAMILY FACTORS THAT MAY IMPACT STUDENT LEARNING

The role that family plays in child development and learning is widely identified within the existing literature. To examine how family members may impact student learning, this study included scholarly research that focused on the role of primary guardians and/or adult family members that live in a child's home and their relationship to student learning and academic achievement in American schools, focusing primarily on grades kindergarten through twelfth grade. This study's review of literature on how family members may impact learning focused on using the aforementioned definition of learning as not only the accumulation of academic knowledge but also as improved understanding of how to successfully navigate oneself through social situations and institutions. Through narrowing the existing literature using these means, scholarly research was identified that has focused on the potential influence of parents on their

children's readiness for kindergarten and impact during the first five years of their child's life, how protective functions of family members may prevent students from engaging in deviant social relationships, the importance of family communication with teachers and how parent expectations may impact student success and motivation.

Consistent and supportive parent involvement in the education of children has been identified as having a strong relationship with student achievement and learning (Crosnoe, Erickson, & Bornbusch, 2002; Gottfried & Gottfried, 1989; Lunenburg & Irby, 2002; Powell, 1991; Usher & Kober, 2012). Parent involvement with and expectations for their children's learning has also been identified as an important factor for kindergarten readiness and success. A large majority of the existing literature focuses on the role of parents in preparing students for entry to school and readiness for kindergarten expectations. Childrearing practices during the first five years of a child's life have a strong relationship to school readiness. Parent beliefs and practices that view their child as an active contributor to their own learning, involve a realistic understanding of their child's abilities, ask children questions that stimulate thinking and promote verbal problem-solving and also reading to children have been linked to improved school readiness and learning upon entry to kindergarten (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 1998; Powell, 1991). Furthermore, parent academic expectations for their children upon entry to school has been identified to be both a cause and effect of child academic achievement and self-image and is also laden with specific cultural and social class differences (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979; Khan, 2012; Lareau, 1987; Powell, 1991). Within the home environment, the creation of early literacy opportunities for children and cognitively stimulating opportunities have also been linked to having a positive relationship with student learning and readiness upon entry to kindergarten (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 1998; Powell, 1991). The composition of a

child's family, including factors such as living with less than two biological parents or living with a grandparent, and also the connection and quality of time spent with a biological mother have also shown both direct and indirect relationships with learning upon entry to kindergarten (Pilkauskas, 2014; Powell, 1991).

The role that family plays in ensuring protective functions over children may result in improved learning for children throughout their adolescent experiences. Family composition and childrearing practices may reduce adolescent delinquency and substance abuse and also protect children from having friends who may be considered deviant and impede student learning (Crosnoe, Erickson, & Dornbusch, 2002). Adolescent friendships may promote engagement in deviant activities, which often have a strong and negative relationship to student learning and school behavior (Aseltine, 1995; Matsueda & Anderson, 1998). Both the role parents play in monitoring adolescent friendships and being involved in their children's life have been found to some extent to reduce adolescent delinquency, discourage deviant friendships and correspondingly improve the likelihood that children have improved learning outcomes (Crosnoe et al., 2002). As parents help to develop a positive academic orientation and commitment to school in their children, their children are less likely to be deviant and jeopardize accomplishments and future opportunities (Jenkins, 1995; Crosnoe et al., 2002). Through closely monitoring the friendships of their children, parents may improve the academic achievement of their children while also decreasing deviant school behaviors (Gottfredson, 1987).

The level of involvement of parents in the educational experiences of their children has also been found to have a positive relationship with student learning (Lareau, 2015; Usher, 2012). Intrinsic academic motivation of students has been found to have a correlation with

parent involvement. Even in circumstances where parents are unable to assist their children with particular school assignments or concepts, parents may encourage their children to have a stronger sense of competence and control over their learning and have a positive attitude towards school (Gottfried et al., 1994; Grolnick, Friendly, & Bellas, 2009). Parents may also have a positive impact on the learning of their child through having high expectations for their child's learning, believing in their child's ability and competence, exposing them to different experiences and thinking, encouraging curiosity and not using rewards or punishments or praising intelligence levels. Student homework completion, which is a common academic task in many American schools, may also be positively impacted by parents when they attempt to foster a belief and value on completion (Gottfried et al., 1994).

2.5 CULTURAL CAPITAL AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron contributed an original theoretical framework to the scientific world on the concept of cultural capital and how cultural capital impacts a student's educational opportunities and experiences. Specifically, Bourdieu's (1977) examination of the grandes ecoles and the relationship between a family's cultural capital and students' educational attainment sparked a decades long debate on how cultural capital may impact academic achievement and also students' ability to successfully navigate through mainstream educational institutions. A primary finding from Bourdieu's examination of the grandes ecoles is that seemingly neutral academic standards are laden with class differences which result in the reinforcement of social hierarchies through school systems. Educators then reward students whose cultural capital is congruent with the expectations of the school system (DiMaggio, 1982;

Lareau, 1987, 2015; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). In the case of Bourdieu's examination of the *grandes ecoles*, a student's ability to be admitted to France's elite universities was found to have a strong relationship to their family's cultural capital [as measured by academic level achieved by forbearers] for up to two generations on both sides of the family.

Teacher communication with both students and parents who participate in middle and upper-class status cultures is often more natural and effective than the communication between teachers and students and their families from lower status cultures (DiMaggio, 1982; Lareau, 1987). Teachers often communicate and provide more attention and special assistance to students whose cultural traits are deemed consistent with higher culture expectations and perceive these students as more intelligent and gifted than students who lack cultural capital. Teachers' means of communication patterns with students from higher status cultures often result in higher grades in high school than those students from lower status cultures (DiMaggio, 1982). Classroom language often draws unevenly from the sociolinguistic experiences of a child's home. For example, students with the characteristics associated with lower levels of cultural capital often have more difficulty dealing with authority patterns, school curricula, and communicating within school linguistic structures (Lareau, 1987).

Lareau's (1987) qualitative examination of two elementary schools located within a 30-minute drive of one another also reveals how class-related cultural factors shape parents' participation in the education of their children and parent compliance with teacher requests. Lareau's research suggests that higher levels of parent participation for those students from upper-middle class communities may result in a form of cultural capital that leads to higher elementary school grades and engagement when compared to those students from working-class communities. Specifically, the manner in which middle class parents supervise, monitor, and

oversee the educational experiences of their children typically mirrors the requests and expectations of schools and educators. The academic nature and frequency of parent communication with schools and educators serves as a form of cultural capital for students that either inhibits or accelerates compliance with standard school expectations, improved levels of academic achievement, and students' and parents' feelings of connection and value to their schools (Broh, 2002; Lareau, 1987). Parents' level of understanding of school curriculum and how to advocate for their children's educational needs may also closely relate to social class differences and serve as a form of cultural capital for middle class children that is largely absent for children from working-class backgrounds. Finally, parents' view of education being a "shared responsibility" between the school and family versus parents' view of education being the "teacher's job" may also have a strong relationship to social class differences and student elementary school grades (Lareau, 1987).

Student academic abilities and weaknesses are also a result of the identity negotiations that students form within social contexts and the embodied cultural capital students use as a form of literacy to navigate through schools may be developed through these social contexts at different rates (Arriaza, 2003; Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006; Meo, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Students often come to school with different resources that contribute to both the way teachers view students and form expectations on students and also on how students employ their own resources and strategies to meet standard school expectations (Bourdieu, 1986; Meo, 2011). Bourdieu's (1993) examination of social fields and educational resources of students implies that social relationships within schools lead to competitive systems within classrooms and schools that allow students to draw unevenly on cultural resources compared to one another and deploy strategies based on learned cultural behaviors. Students from working

class backgrounds that lack these cultural resources may acquire social, linguistic, and cultural competencies; however, scholarly research also reveals that natural familiarity with these competencies is hard for students from working class backgrounds to achieve and that they may be penalized academically throughout their educational experiences due to their lack of familiarity with the cultural expectations of educators (Khan, 2012; Meo, 2011). In comparison to students from higher SES backgrounds, students from working class communities and lower SES backgrounds often have lower levels of self-esteem, motivation, and awareness of how to advocate for themselves resulting in lower levels of academic achievement across their educational experiences (Holland & Andre, 1987; McDonough, 1997).

Transition periods in students' K-12 educational experiences represent additional difficulties and barriers to academic success for all students. For students transitioning from elementary school to middle school, changes related to higher levels of academic expectations, the scheduling structure of middle school, lower parent involvement with educational issues and support, changing peer expectations, and biological changes in a child's body may negatively affect academic achievement. Furthermore, students of different genders may experience uneven levels of stress that may negatively affect academic performance when transitioning from elementary to middle school (Goldstein et al., 2015). For students that come from low SES backgrounds, overcoming these changes while meeting common school expectations can be a difficult challenge (Akos et al., 2015). Due to the often conflicting expectations and beliefs of educational institutions and families from low SES backgrounds, the changes that are required of students as they transition from elementary to middle school often works to widen academic achievement gaps between students from low SES backgrounds and their peers from more affluent backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

2.6 SCHOOL LEVEL FACTORS THAT MAY IMPACT STUDENT LEARNING

School level factors that may impact student learning and achievement have been studied and written about for a long period of time. The existing literature in the field is wide and diverse and focuses on a variety of programs, practices, ideas and considerations that may be considered school level factors. To narrow the existing literature and focus on school level actions that may contribute to the development of cultural capital for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the focus and summary offered within this section was narrowed to school level actions that may improve the learning experiences for all students. This section seeks to provide a brief overview of the practices and programs that the existing literature reveals to have a positive relationship with student learning.

A recurring theme throughout the review of literature of school level actions that may improve the learning of disadvantaged students was the notion of the importance of relationships at a variety of levels, programs and interactions within schools. Whether it was the review of large scale meta-analysis of research or smaller individual studies, relationships between teachers and students, teachers and teachers, and school districts and communities was a central theme in the contribution of school level actions that may improve student learning. Within this realm of relationships, teacher and student relationships were found to have the strongest and most positive relationship with academic achievement and learning. Developing and maintaining positive relationships between teachers and students has been found to have a positive correlation with student motivation, academic performance, classroom learning and positive school behavior (Finn, Schrodtt, Witt, Elledge, Jernberg & Larson, 2009; Hattie, 2009; Marzano, Marzano & Pickering, 2003; Mikk, Krips, Saalik, & Kalk, 2016). The impact that positive relationships between teachers and students can have on learning is most effective when teachers

show both support and care behaviors. These behaviors include listening to students, encouragement, facilitation of learning and motivation, honesty and classroom attention. Furthermore, the impact of positive relationships between teachers and students can be attained even when students report they only have one positive relationship with a teacher in their school and has also been found to have a positive relationship to improved performance on standardized and international assessments (Mikk et al., 2016; Raufelder, Scherber, & Wood, 2016). Simply having one teacher within their school that students report to like may lead to improved life satisfaction for students and can also compensate for the negative ramifications of when students feel they have negative relationships with other teachers, which can be characterized by disliking or feeling disrespected by a teacher (Raufelder et al.).

In addition to emphasizing relationship building with students, schools may focus on improving curriculum, the safe and orderly operation of their environment, setting goals, developing instructional practices, increasing communication within their organization and with their stakeholders, development of distributed leadership initiatives, use data and assessments to track and adjust student learning targets, develop focused budgets and a variety of other tactics to improve student learning (Marzano, 2003; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). With that said, the effect that an individual teacher may have on student achievement is capable of outweighing any specific school level action (Good & Brophy, 1986; Marzano, 2003). Teacher contributions to learning and achievement not only extend to building positive relationships, but also in ensuring effective and appropriate instruction. Hunter (2004) and Pollack (2007) have contributed instructional blueprints of best instructional practices that may have a positive impact on student learning and recommend the following daily teaching practices: setting objectives and goals, accessing prior knowledge of students, teacher input, using anticipatory and closing

activities, guided practice, independent practice and generalization. Beyond the individual teacher level, schools may improve student learning and achievement through the improvement of school climate. Actions that schools may implement to improve climate include but are not limited to: developing principals to become instructional leaders, setting high expectations for student and staff performance, implementing consistent and culturally appropriate student discipline systems, focus on communication and messaging with stakeholders, and ensuring a safe and happy school environment. When these practices have been found to be employed in tandem within schools, their impact on student learning and achievement has been found to have a positive correlation (Smith, Connolly, & Pryseski, 2014; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

The addition of supporting programs and services is another manner in which schools may develop programs to assist and improve student learning. At the middle school level, implementation of advisory programs to support students' cognitive and developmental needs as a supporting program is cited often within the existing literature. As early as the 1920s, advisory programs have been mentioned as a means to improve the school behavior, curriculum, vocational and social-moral concerns of students (Koos, 1927). At the present time there is not a universally accepted definition of school-level advisory and there is not a universal recognition of the "right way" to organize advisory; however, recommendations for objectives to include in advisory programs include: promotion of opportunities for the social and emotional development of students, designing small groups for students to develop trusting relationships and discuss concerns with adults, promotion of an adult advocate for every student, assist students with academic and behavior problems, and develop real-world learning opportunities for students (Cole, 1990; Thompson & Homestead, 2004). Through effective advisory programs, schools may improve the level of connection students feel to their school, one another and their teachers

and correspondingly improve student educational motivation, classroom engagement, student attendance and academic achievement (Shulkind & Foote, 2009).

Schools may also provide additional supports to improve student learning that include approaches such as the use of nurses, counselors, social workers, psychologists and mental health specialists. These supports are meant to reduce the exposure of students to high stress and nonacademic challenges while also promoting self-regulation and social-emotional control over oneself (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). When students have their academic, social-emotional, health and family needs met they are often operating at an increased capacity to engage and learn in school (Ayoub & Fisher, 2006). Community partnerships and after school programs are also used in many school settings to provide students with opportunities to remove non-academic barriers to learning. School and community partnerships have long been used as a means to improve the learning and achievement of students in high poverty, urban schools but also in school districts that have strong connections with community leaders and resources (Walsh et al., 2014).

2.7 METHODOLOGY USED TO STUDY THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURAL CAPITAL AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND ATTAINMENT

A large percentage of literature that is currently available on the relationship between cultural capital and student academic achievement and attainment has primarily focused on the analysis of large scale, longitudinal research such as but not limited to: National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999 (ECLS-K), and the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002). These analyses

have focused on both quantitative and qualitative longitudinal data (Lareau, 2015; Weis, 2004). Within these meta-analyses and longitudinal qualitative studies, a primary focus has been on identifying how students from different SES backgrounds and racial and cultural backgrounds employ their embedded knowledge and experiences to achieve either higher or lower grades in high school, become accepted into college upon high school graduation, complete high school without dropping out, perform on standardized tests that are often administered in high school, and self-advocate for themselves throughout high school and early adulthood (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Barr, 2015; Bodovski, 2010; Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; DiMaggio, 1982; Holland & Andre, 1987; Lareau, 2015). A focus on analyzing the potential effects of socioeconomic status and measurable academic outcomes through large scale, longitudinal data became a priority when James Coleman's original government sponsored findings became public through the Coleman Report and has maintained to the present day.

While the majority of the available literature has focused on analyzing large-scale data reports, smaller research studies have been conducted that focus on how students employ cultural capital to achieve and attain important academic outcomes. Amongst these studies, many focus on students' preparedness for school and teacher expectations upon their first years of elementary school. Survey, interview, case study and focus group research has analyzed elements such as but not limited to time spent reading to children, community and family social etiquette norms, family self-advocacy expectations for children, and time spent talking to children about school assignments as key variables that may impact a students' readiness to begin elementary school (Arriaza, 2003; Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006; Meo 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Comparative case study research has also focused on students' levels of elementary engagement with teacher expectations and the amount of support that parents have

for reinforcing school rules and expectations during elementary school (Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvart, 1999).

The manner in which schools may support the development of cultural capital in students is an area that does not have a large amount of existing literature at the present time. To support the development of cultural capital in students, smaller studies have focused on how different school programs such as advisory and community based programs provide students additional cultural capital towards gaining pro-school values and also how involvement in school-sponsored sports or extracurricular activities may build positive connections with adult leaders and peer groups that could lead to learned behaviors that are consistent with school expectations (Broh, 2002; Goldstein et al., 2015; Killgo, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The research methods that have been employed to study cultural capital and important school outcomes has clearly identified that students from lower SES backgrounds often have fewer skills and dispositions to support equal educational achievement and attainment when compared to their peers from more affluent or supportive home and community environments. While many students from lower SES backgrounds can and do achieve higher levels of educational achievement and attainment, the large majority struggle to meet the same academic expectations as their peers from more privileged backgrounds (Broh, 2002; Killgo, 2010; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014). Identifying the factors that support educational success for students from low SES backgrounds and learning more about the motivations of students whom achieve both higher and lower levels of academic achievement and attainment is an important understanding for educational researchers and practitioners.

2.8 GAPS WITHIN THE EXISTING LITERATURE

At the present time, gaps in the available literature exist regarding the potential reasons why some students from low SES backgrounds consistently meet academic expectations at a much more successful rate than the majority of students from low SES backgrounds. The literature has primarily focused on the relationships between cultural capital and academic achievement and attainment for students from lower SES backgrounds. However, very few small-scale studies have been published on the perceptions of students, families and school staff of how each stakeholder group may have a positive and/or negative influence on student learning in middle school. The majority of small-scale studies focus on high school academic outcomes or elementary preparedness of students. As presented within this dissertation, students from low SES backgrounds have demonstrated consistent struggles during key transition periods in their K-12 educational careers. The transition to and from middle school is one of these transition periods and few research studies have focused on understanding how cultural capital may affect students during middle school transition. Furthermore, few published studies have focused on the relationship between cultural capital and student learning for middle school aged children.

The research design presented within the next section of this dissertation proposed an investigation that sought to add additional literature to this field. This study surveyed a specific grade-level of students from low SES backgrounds to identify their distribution of academic achievement, as measured by academic GPA, during their final two years of middle school. From this distribution of academic achievement, high and low performing students were identified and students, school staff and families completed a learning inventory activity to analyze potential factors that may have a positive and/or negative impact on the learning of the priority students. This study adds to the existing literature as it is comparative in nature and

provides a mixed methods approach to examine broad factors that may impact student learning in middle school.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study was developed to examine the experiences and perceptions of a particular group of priority students within one school district in relationship to three broad areas that may have a positive or negative experience on their learning. The priority group of students were identified based on their family's SES background and their own academic performance during their final two years of middle school. This study sought to gain insight and understanding of how school, family and student factors may contribute to a positive or negative learning experience for the priority students. Within the context of this study, learning was identified as not only the accumulation of academic knowledge but also as improved understanding of how to successfully navigate oneself through social situations and institutions (i.e. the ability to work with others as a member of a group and the ability to enable resources within institutions to support advancement). This definition of learning was developed based on existing literature in relation to cultural capital theory and the academic achievement and advancement of compulsory school aged students (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979; Khan, 2012; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Lareau, 1987; Panther Unified School District; Zink & Dyson, 2009). School, family and self-related factors that may have a positive or negative impact on the learning of the priority students was investigated through a learning inventory activity with the following stakeholders: priority students, parents of the priority students, as well as teachers, administrators and other school-staff that have direct experience with the priority students.

Academic records (student cumulative GPA by grade) were analyzed and an input discussion group was held with teachers and school-staff to identify students within this demographic that have consistently earned high academic achievement and students that have consistently earned low academic achievement across their middle school years. High academic achievement was defined by a core academic GPA of either a 3.0 or higher during both the students' 7th grade school year and the first nine weeks of their 8th grade school year and also through teacher identification as a consistently high performing student in class. Conversely, low academic achievement was defined by a core academic GPA of a 2.5 or lower during both the students' 7th grade school year and the first nine weeks of their 8th grade school year and also through teacher identification as a consistently low performing student in class. These GPA ranges were used as a threshold to identify high and low achievement at least partially due to recent focus at the local and federal levels on students maintaining a 3.0 GPA or higher in order to be considered both college and career ready (American College Testing, 2015; Hein et al., 2013; National Forum on Education Statistics, 2015; Panther Unified School District, 2015). By focusing on priority students that have achieved both high and low levels of academic achievement, this study sought to gain knowledge of how and why these students experience different levels of academic success. By learning more about the factors that may contribute to positive or negative learning experiences for the priority students from a variety of stakeholders, valuable information may be gained to support teacher and administrator professional development towards closing the achievement gap for historically underperforming students from low SES backgrounds and also develop academic programs and resources to improve the academic achievement of these students. Through the course of inquiry and final results of this

study, records of the names of all involved participants was kept confidential and will not be shared in writing or presentation of results.

3.1 INQUIRY SETTING

Panther Area Middle School, a Grades 5-8 middle school located in southwestern Pennsylvania, serves as the inquiry setting for my problem of practice. Within Panther Area Middle School, students in Grades Five and Six are considered to be intermediate students while students in Grades Seven and Eight are considered to be middle school students. Students do not fully transition from an elementary model of schooling [85 minute blocks of instruction, assigned to 2-3 teachers total, limited movement within the building] to a middle school model of schooling [40 minute classes, consistent changing of teachers and rooms by class period, and advanced and special interest classes] until their transition from Sixth to Seventh Grade. Each grade level ranges in number between 100 and 120 students and includes at least six full time instructional teachers, one grade level instructional aide, and the further support of arts, music and technology teachers.

Using the criteria established to identify a student as coming from a low SES background [qualification for free or reduced lunch], between 42% and 49% of Panther Area Middle School students at each grade level are considered students from low SES backgrounds (School Performance Profile, 2015). On the 2014-2015 Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) Exam, 60% of Panther Seventh Grade students scored proficient [reflecting a satisfactory performance] on the English Language Arts PSSA and 35% scored proficient on the Mathematics PSSA. However, only 38% of Panther Seventh Graders that qualify as a student

from a low SES background scored proficient on the same year's English Language Arts PSSA and only 21% scored proficient on the Mathematics PSSA (pa.drc.edirect.com). While the PSSA is only one measure of academic achievement, it does show an academic achievement gap between students that qualify and students that do not qualify as coming from low SES backgrounds within this setting.

3.2 STAKEHOLDERS

The students at Panther Area Middle School are not a culturally or racially diverse group and are predominantly white; however, differences exist between them when comparing family SES factors such as parent education, occupation and income, and home support for learning and school values (Panther Unified School District, 2015). At Panther Area Middle School, students often get placed into advanced, regular, or special needs educational tracks based on a variety of factors that include but are not limited to: academic performance on standardized tests, commitment to completing academic tasks in class and as homework, and student behavior. Many students that struggle with any one of these factors or multiple factors are often placed in a lower academic track. Once placed into these tracks, students are unlikely to get out of them during their time at Panther Unified School District. For students placed into a lower track, what is at stake is access to resources that allow them to get out of their track and have the opportunity to take advanced or elective courses that are often associated with college bound students within the district.

Teachers most actively control the day-to-day interactions and learning that occur within Panther Area Middle school. Because a significant percentage of a teacher's annual evaluation is

now determined by student success on standardized assessments, teachers have their professional position at stake each and every day they are with students. As the primary caretakers of Panther Unified students, parents/guardians often serve as students' first and most influential educator. Within this inquiry setting, the perspective of parents/guardians often varies by family. For many families, eventual access to a higher education for their child through Panther Area's curriculum and educational opportunities is a primary focus (Akos et al., 2015; Broh, 2002; Goldstein et al., 2015). For other families, the academic success of their children is no more important than other daily life activities such as going to work, playing sports, spending time with friends or helping out at home. From the viewpoint of the administrative team, improving the academic performance of students identified as coming from low SES backgrounds is very important. If these students do not experience both academic and behavioral success at school, they will likely not experience the same academic, social-emotional and career success as many of their peers at Panther Unified School District.

3.3 APPROACH

The purpose of this study was to gain knowledge and insight into some of the important factors that may contribute to positive or negative learning experiences for the priority students within Panther Area Middle School. The approach this study followed was exploratory in nature and focused on identifying common trends among the priority students and other important stakeholders within the district of focus. An initial analysis of the distribution of academic achievement of the priority students and input from a group of their current and former teachers enabled this study to focus on students who have consistently performed at either high or low

levels of academic success across their middle school years. By identifying high and low performing students, this study was able to more fully investigate the factors that may contribute to higher levels of academic performance for some priority students and how these factors may differ amongst the low performing priority students. A dual focus on high and low performing priority students as well as the involvement of multiple stakeholders enabled inquiry to become more comprehensive in scope and potentially provide more clarity on how and why the priority students within this setting may experience vastly different levels of academic performance. All investigation of this problem of practice stemmed from the theoretical perspective of cultural capital theory and therefore sought to gain knowledge on how issues of cultural capital may manifest within this setting.

3.4 DESIGN AND METHODS

A mixed methods approach was used to investigate this problem of practice. Deliberate attention was given to the priority students in order to use multiple inquiry techniques to gain insight into the context of practice that contributes to this problem within Panther Area Middle School. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed. These included secondary data analysis of the priority students' GPA, a teacher input discussion group with current and former teachers of the priority students, and a learning inventory activity of students, parents and staff designed to identify and analyze school, family and self-related student factors that contribute to the learning experiences of the priority students. The evidence that was gathered through these inquiry techniques seeks to provide insight into the research questions posed previously within this paper and correspondingly improve educational practices that aim to increase the academic

achievement of students from low SES backgrounds. The names of all participants in this study are confidential and not used in my professional writing or presentation of the results of this study. Participant selection and recruitment is described in the following sections within this dissertation; however, descriptions of participants are limited to protect the anonymity of all individuals involved.

3.4.1 Secondary Data Analysis

Secondary data analysis was used as an inquiry technique to identify the distribution of academic achievement among the priority students. Academic GPA's were established for each priority student using the criteria identified within the Panther Area Middle School Parent-Student Handbook for all of the students' core academic classes: English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science and Social Studies. Their GPA was identified for the priority students' end-of-year final grades during their 7th grade school year and their Quarter 1 grades in 8th grade. This study used GPA data from both 7th and 8th grade in order to gain perspective on student academic achievement across multiple school years. To calculate GPA, this study used the numerical system used by Panther Unified School District of identifying student GPA: letter grade of an A (90-100% or more) is given a score of four, letter grade of a B (80-89%) is given a score of three, letter grade of a C (70-79%) is given a score of two, letter grade of a D (60-69%) is given a score of one, and a letter grade of an F (59% or lower) is given a score of zero. Using this system, the number total of the priority students' GPA in all four of their core academic classes was added and then divided by four to assign each student a core GPA rating. This method to identify GPA was calculated for both the priority students' final grades in 7th grade and first quarter grades in 8th grade.

Once their combined GPA was calculated, each priority student was identified as either a high performing (GPA of 3.0 or higher) or low performing (GPA of 2.5 or lower) student. A GPA of 3.0 was used as a threshold to identify performance status due to the importance placed by school districts and institutes of higher education on students maintaining a 3.0 GPA or higher to be considered on track for college and career readiness standards (American College Testing, 2015; Hein, Smerdon & Sambolt, 2013; National Forum on Education Statistics, 2015). Within the Panther Unified School District Comprehensive Plan, student preparation for career and college readiness is identified as a key priority for the district (Panther Unified School District, 2015).

The participants within this study had to meet a requirement of being a student at Panther Area Middle School during their entire 7th grade school year and the first quarter of their 8th grade school year. Each of the priority students was in 8th grade during the time this study was conducted and each student was assigned a grade in both 7th grade and 8th grade in each of their core academic classes. Both 7th and 8th grade student GPA data was used in this study to help identify student academic achievement over the course of more than one academic school year. Because 7th and 8th grade are the last two years of middle school within Panther Unified School District, these grades were chosen as the focus years of this study so that information could be gathered on the academic performance of the priority students shortly before they enter high school. The Panther Unified School District graduating class of 2021 had 55 students that met the criteria of being considered a priority student at the time this study was completed. Because three of these students were not given a grade in all of the core academic classes they were discarded from this study. The remaining 52 students were all offered a chance to participate in this study.

The priority students of the Panther Unified School District graduating class of 2021 were informed about this study during a meeting in which the purpose of the study and methods of inquiry were explained to them. In order for the priority students to participate within this study, they had to receive parental permission and provide student assent. These requirements were fulfilled for the priority students that participated in this study through a letter to their parents in which the steps of the study were explained and a space provided for signed parental permission and student assent [See Appendix A]. Overall, 29 of the grade-level's 52 eligible priority students provided parent permission and assent to participate in this study. Seventh Grade report cards and first quarter 8th grade report cards for each of the priority students that participated within this study were then reviewed to determine their GPA and develop an academic distribution for the priority students that would participate in this study.

Due to the number and GPA's of the students that provided parent permission and assent to participate in this study and to ensure that the student groups had balanced numbers for participation in a learning inventory activity, students had to be identified for both the low and high performing groups based on fluctuating GPA criteria. This study identified students as low performing that had a GPA of 2.5 or lower during their 7th grade school year and did not have a GPA of 3.0 or higher during their 8th grade school year. Students that were identified as high performing had a 2.51 GPA or higher during their 7th grade school year and also had a 3.0 GPA or higher during Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year. Fluctuating the students' GPA ranges enabled this study to use a 3.0 GPA or higher threshold to identify high performing students and also ensure even numbers of students for participation in a learning inventory activity. The results of secondary data analysis [described in the next chapter within this dissertation] revealed positive GPA growth from a majority of the priority students' end-of-year 7th grade GPA to their

first quarter 8th grade GPA and resulted in the need to fluctuate GPA ranges so this study's learning inventory activity could be completed in a timely and efficient manner.

3.4.2 Teacher Input

A discussion group was held with members of the teaching and instructional staff at Panther Area Middle School to ensure that identification of the priority students as either high or low performing is consistent with the results of secondary data analysis and to gain understanding of teacher perceptions of the priority students in relationship to many of the academic concepts mentioned within the literature review of this dissertation. It was important to hold a discussion group and gain teacher input to try and determine that unusual external circumstances did not contribute to low academic achievement of students and to identify students that would be a good fit for this study. The input of these teachers was gathered through a focused discussion group and questions that sought to gain knowledge of the teachers' perspective of the performance of the priority students in relation to the following academic indicators: class participation, quality of work, attendance, behavior, homework completion, test performance and contribution to group work. These academic indicators have been identified within the existing literature to be closely related to students' level of cultural capital and academic achievement and attainment (Akos et al., 2015; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979; Broh, 2002; Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; DiMaggio, 1982; Lareau, 1987, 2015; McDonough, 1997). Teacher comments regarding student performance in class have been characterized to general statements that staff feel are representative of their view of students' performance and statements that are particular to a student and may reveal identification of the student have been coded to de-identify the comments.

A total of 15 teachers at Panther Area Middle School were invited to participate within the teacher input discussion. These teachers were selectively chosen in relationship to their knowledge and experience of the priority students and included Panther Area Middle School's current 7th and 8th grade teaching staff, guidance counselors and other support staff at Panther Area Middle School, and former special education and core academic class teachers of the priority students during 6th grade. Ten of the fifteen teachers invited participated within the teacher input group and they included a variety of 7th and 8th grade core academic teachers, special education teachers, former core academic teachers of the priority students, a guidance counselor and other staff that support the mental health and educational needs of Panther Area Middle School students. During their input group, the teachers were provided with a list of the students that participated within this study that qualified as a priority student and had provided parent permission and assent to participate. The teachers readily recognized these priority students as their data is often used within the school's Title I plan and programs.² The teachers were asked to provide one or two word descriptors based on their memory of the performance of the priority students in their class in relationship to the aforementioned academic concepts. The perceptions of the teachers ensured this study gathered and analyzed qualitative understanding of the academic achievement and distribution of the priority students within this study.

² Through the Elementary and Secondary Education Schools Act (ESEA), Title I provides financial assistance to schools with higher numbers or percentages of children from low income families.

3.4.3 Learning Inventory Activity

A learning inventory activity was completed with each stakeholder group identified within this inquiry plan: high and low achieving priority students, parents of the priority students, teachers and other school staff, and district administration. The participants within each learning inventory are described in some detail in Chapter 4 of this dissertation; however, details are kept vague to protect the identity and anonymity of each participant. The purpose of the learning inventory activity was to gain input on the perceptions of each stakeholder group of three broad areas that may contribute to positive or negative learning experiences for the priority students within the district. As mentioned earlier, the three areas include: school-related, family-related, and student factors that each stakeholder group believes may contribute to a positive or negative learning experience. For each stakeholder group, a small focus group was formed to complete the learning inventory activity. Criterion-based purposeful sampling was used to identify participants for this activity based on the aforementioned characteristics (for the priority students) and on their relationship to the priority students for the remainder of the stakeholders.

Each stakeholder focus group completed a fishbone diagram as their learning inventory activity. Fishbone diagrams have been used by researchers and practitioners to analyze problematic issues within educational research and also potential impacts and consequences on educational programs (Ellis, 2015). This study followed the methods outlined by Hewitt-Taylor (2012) for using fishbone diagrams to identify, analyze and potentially solve problems in practice. In relationship to this study's learning inventory activity, recommendations included: clarification of a problem area, input from those directly involved in the problem area, and recognition and categorization of contributory factors that may impact the problem area. A sample template of the fishbone diagram is provided through Figure 1:

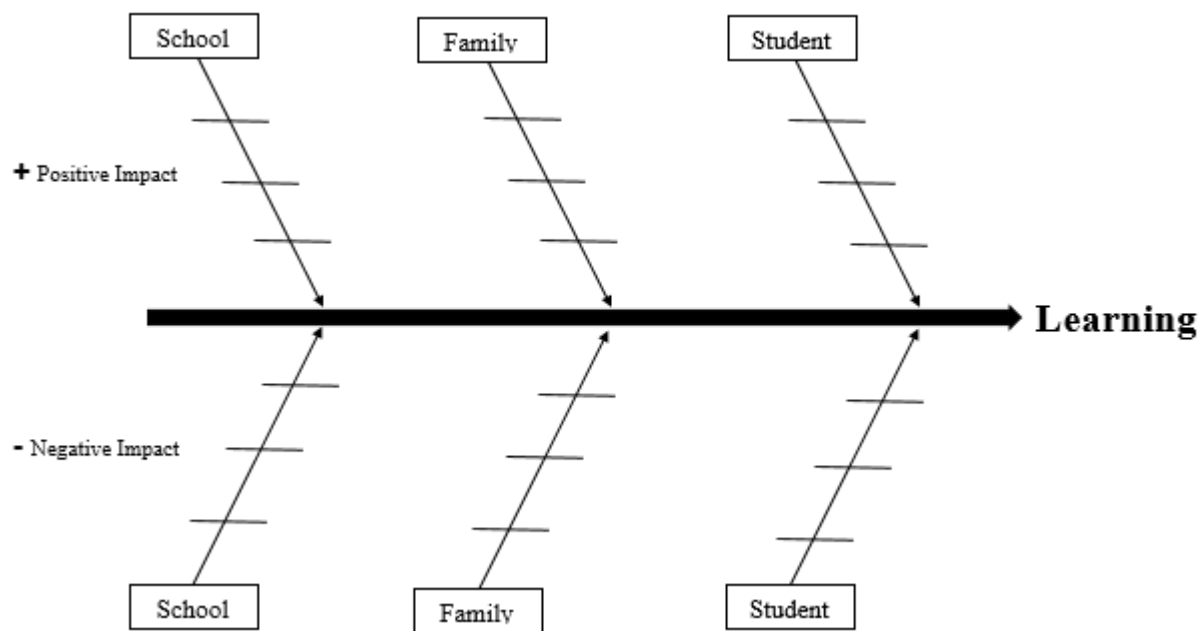


Figure 1. Fishbone diagram template used for learning inventory activity

To start each learning inventory activity, all participants were read a verbal consent script and had to grant their own verbal consent to participate (See Appendix C). Each stakeholder group was then provided with the aforementioned definition of learning provided in Section 3.0 of this dissertation (p. 30). The fishbone diagram was printed on a large, 4'x6' poster paper and each participant received 20 multi-colored sticky notes. The directions given to the participants asked them to write down their thoughts on at least three sticky notes per section of how each broad area (school, family and students) may contribute to a positive or negative learning experience for the priority students. In total, the participants were asked to write down their thoughts on at least 18 sticky notes by placing three sticky notes on each area's positive and negative section (6 total sections times three sticky notes per section). The participants were given two minutes per section to write down their thoughts individually and without talking to one another before being

read prompting questions to further stimulate their thinking for each area. The prompting questions that were provided to the participants were based on school, family and student actions that have been identified within the existing literature to have a positive and/or negative relationship with student learning (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; DiMaggio, 1982; Gottfried et al., 1998; Lareau, 1987, 2015; Holland & Andre, 1987; Marzano et al., 2003; Pollack, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). See Appendix B for the full list of prompting questions. Next, the participants were asked to place their completed sticky notes on the appropriate section of the fishbone diagram. Figure 2 provides an example of a fishbone diagram that the groups would have created before being led through their self-coding process.

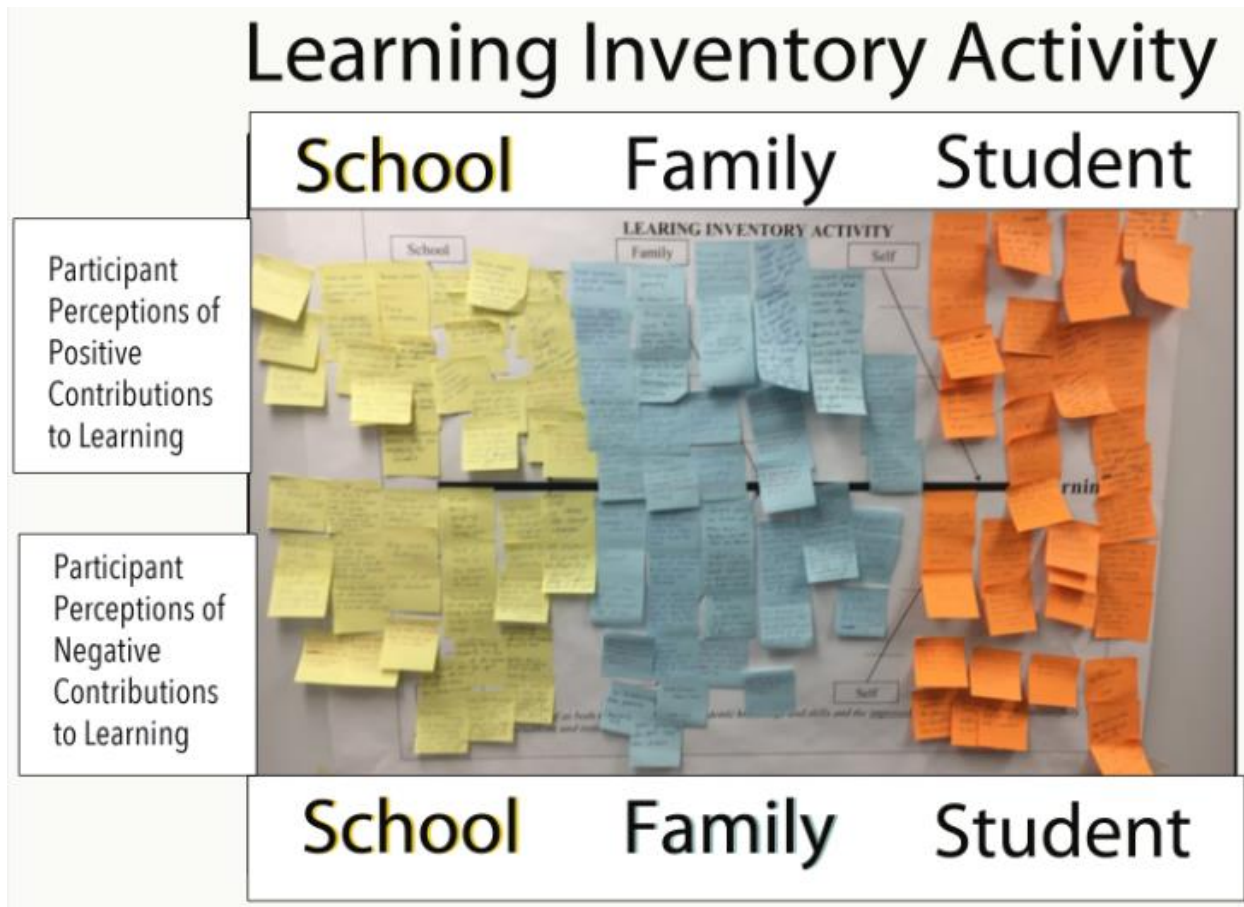


Figure 2. Teacher fishbone diagram before self-coding process

To complete the learning inventory activity, each group was led through a self-coding process in which they were asked to remove the sticky notes from each section of the fishbone diagram and group them into three coding buckets per section. The participants were told that every sticky note in each section had to be placed into one of the three coding buckets within the section the sticky note was originally placed and they were to use their discretion as a group to make sure the sticky notes placed into each coding bucket were as closely related to one another as possible. Once the participants developed three coding buckets for each section of the fishbone diagram (6 sections with 3 coding buckets on each section = 18 total coding buckets), they were told to re-read the sticky notes in each coding bucket and draft a 1-2 sentence description they believed accurately summarized what the sticky notes in each coding bucket described. The participants wrote down their descriptions on 5" x 8" notecards, stapled their sticky notes on the notecard, and then placed their notecards back on the fishbone diagram to represent their coding bucket. Figure 3 shows an example of what a completed fishbone diagram looked like at the end of the learning inventory activity.

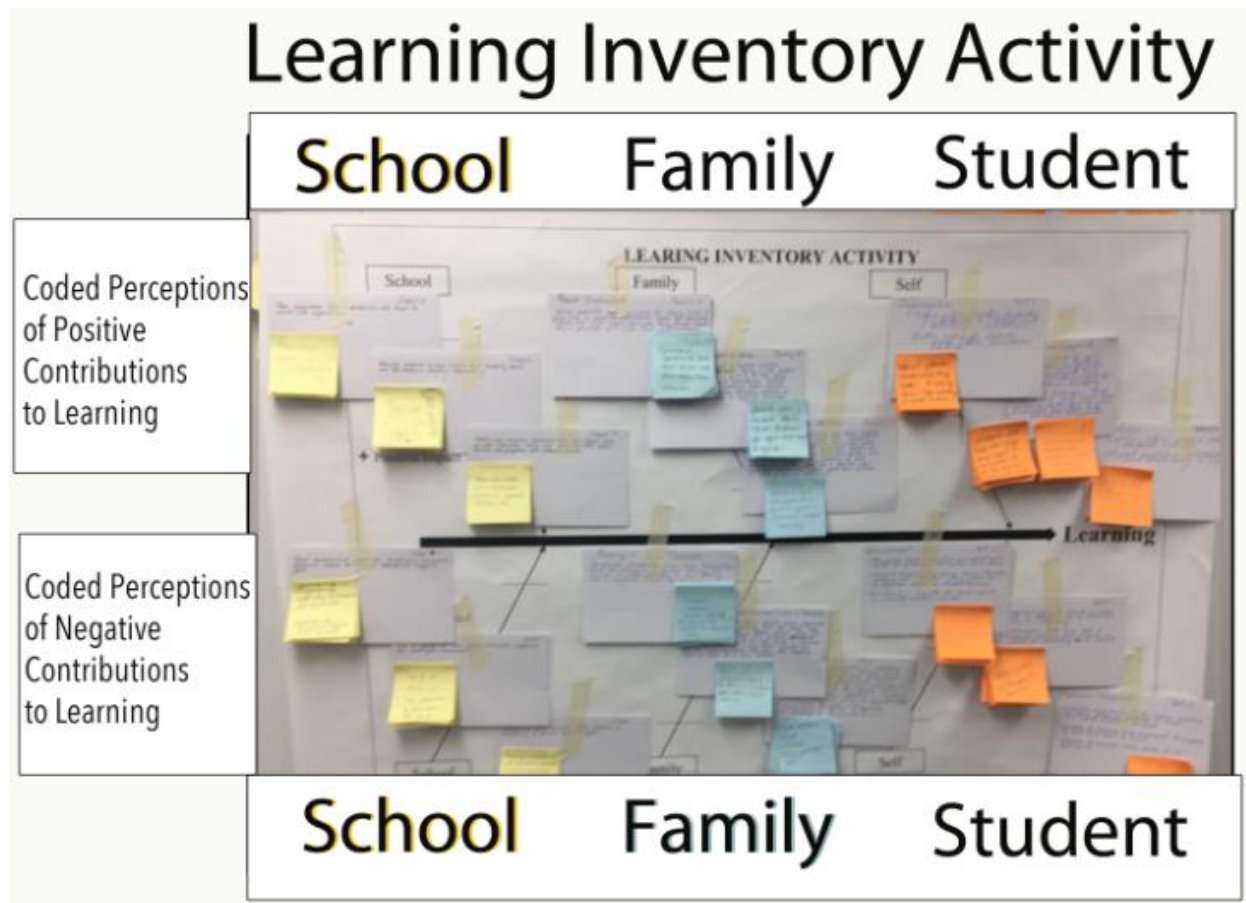


Figure 3. Completed fishbone teacher diagram

Table 1 displays this study's full alignment of inquiry questions, evidence, research design and analysis.

Table 1. Alignment of inquiry questions, evidence, research design, and analysis

Inquiry Question	Evidence	Research Design	Analysis
1) What is the distribution of academic achievement among the priority students at Panther Area Middle School? Amongst the priority student, which students consistently experienced academic success and which students struggled to achieve academic success?	<p>Student academic performance as identified by the combined GPA for the priority students during their 7th grade school year and the first nine weeks of their 8th grade school year.</p> <p>Teacher identification of high and low achieving priority students in relation to academic indicators.</p>	<p>Secondary data analysis to identify the number of students that received a GPA of an A, B, C, D, or F in their core academic classes.</p> <p>Teacher focus group held to gather input on high and low achieving students' performance in relation to academic indicators.</p>	<p>A frequency distribution chart was developed and student grades were tabulated to identify the number of priority students within each reporting grade for the entire grade-level.</p> <p>Identify priority students that consistently performed to high academic achievement and priority students that consistently performed to low academic achievement. Students were identified according to the aforementioned indicators to guide inquiry into questions 2-4.</p>
2) What are the perceptions of the priority students of the school, family and self-related factors that may contribute to a positive or negative impact on their learning?	Student identification and description of the school, family and self-related factors that may contribute to a positive or negative learning experience during middle school.	High performing and low performing group of priority students completed the learning inventory activity. This activity asked students to complete the fishbone diagram and related steps identified within the description in section 3.4.3 of this paper.	Participants coded their responses as a group through the creation of a coding bucket within each fishbone of the learning inventory activity.
3) How do the parents of the priority students describe the same factors that may contribute to a positive or negative learning experience for their children?	Parent identification and description of the school, family and self-related factors that may contribute to a positive or negative learning experience during middle school	A parent group that was composed of parents of the priority students completed the learning inventory activity.	Same as above

Table 1 (continued)

4) How do teachers, administrators, and other school staff describe the same factors that may contribute to a positive or negative learning experience for the priority students?	School-staff identification and description of the school, family and self-related factors that may contribute to a positive or negative learning experience during middle school	School-staff and administration groups completed the learning inventory activity.	Same as above
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4.0 RESULTS OF THE STUDY

This study was completed within Panther Area Middle School, a Grades 5-8 middle school located in southwestern Pennsylvania. At Panther Area Middle School, approximately 42-49% of the school's 475 students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Inquiry for this study focused on the graduating class of 2021 in order to identify the perceptions of key stakeholders, including the students, teachers, district administration and parents of the students, of factors that may have a positive impact on student learning as they transition to high school. Students within the Panther Unified School District graduating class of 2021 that qualify for free or reduced lunch have been referred to as the priority students within this study. A more complete description of the inquiry setting for this study can be found in Section 3.1 of this dissertation (p. 32). The data presented and analyzed within Chapter 4 of this dissertation is displayed by inquiry method and includes the use of tables to show visual representation of the results of this study.

4.1 SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS

Secondary data analysis was completed to identify the distribution of academic achievement among the priority students. This study focused on the grade-point-average (GPA) of the priority students in their core academic classes for their end-of-year 7th grade report card and their first quarter 8th grade report card. Within the Panther Area Middle School Parent-Student

Handbook (2016), core academic classes are considered to be English Language Arts, Mathematics, Social Studies and Science. Core academic classes, as opposed to elective classes, were the focal point of calculating student GPA as Panther Area Middle School requires students to pass three out of their four core academic classes per year to move on to the next grade level. Students at Panther Area Middle School that do not pass three of their four core academic classes must repeat the grade or attend summer school in order to be promoted to the next grade.³ The students at Panther Area Middle School do not have to pass their elective classes to be promoted to the next grade so these classes were not included in student GPA's within this study. Grade-point-average (GPA) was used as one of the primary means to identify academic distribution due to the emphasis placed on GPA as a key indicator of college and career readiness in school districts and institutes of higher education such as colleges and universities (American College Testing, 2015; Hein et al., 2013; National Forum on Education Statistics, 2015).

Using student GPA in core academic classes, two sets of academic distribution data were analyzed on the priority students. First, Panther Unified School District used their student information system (MMS) to identify the exact number of priority students within a core academic GPA range during their 7th grade school year, the first quarter of their 8th grade school year and the number of priority students that fell into a particular GPA range during both school years. Student names or grades were not collected for this step of the study and only the number of priority students within a particular GPA range was provided. Tables 2 displays how the entire grade-level of priority students performed during 7th grade and the first quarter of their 8th grade school year in their core academic classes. This table shows a core academic range, the

³ Summer school classes are offered to students through various platforms to make up end of the year failing grades in core academic classes. Students in this district must pass three of their four core academic classes to be promoted to the next grade.

number of priority students that were identified within each GPA range, and the overall percentage of the priority students in each GPA range. Table 2 shows that 30% of the priority students had a 3.0 GPA or higher during their 7th grade school year. This number is important when considering that a primary indicator of career and college readiness includes students maintaining a 3.0 or higher GPA (American College Testing, 2015; Hein et al., 2013; National Forum on Education Statistics, 2015). Conversely, Table 2 also shows that 70% of Panther Area Middle School's 52 priority students in the graduating class of 2021 failed to maintain a 3.0 GPA or higher during their 7th grade school year.

Column three of Table 2 displays the 8th grade Quarter 1 academic distribution of the priority students. When comparing the priority students' 7th grade end-of-year GPA to their first quarter 8th grade GPA, it is clear the priority students as a whole showed improved classroom grades during the start of their 8th grade school year. For Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year, 38% of the priority students earned a 3.0 GPA or higher, which represents an 8% growth from the percentage of priority students that earned a 3.0 GPA or higher during their 7th grade school year. Furthermore, 20% of the priority students earned a GPA of 1.99 or less during Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year. The decrease in the percentage of priority students earning a 1.99 GPA or lower during Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year when compared to their end of year 7th grade GPA is 14%. Table 2 also displays growth in the percentage of priority students that earned a 2.0 or higher GPA when compared to the priority students' 7th grade GPA's.

Table 2. Academic distribution of priority students by grade

Core academic GPA range	7th grade academic distribution: Number & percentage of priority students within GPA range (n = 52)	8th grade Qt. 1 academic distribution: Number & percentage of priority students within GPA range (n = 52)
1.0 or lower	6 – 12%	1 – 2%
1.01 – 1.5	6 – 12%	4 – 8%
1.51 – 1.99	5 – 10%	5 – 10%
2.0 – 2.5	12 – 23%	17 – 33%
2.51 – 2.99	7 – 13%	5 – 10%
3.0 – 3.5	7 – 13%	13 – 25%
3.51 – 4.0	9 – 17%	7 – 13%

The data in Table 3 was provided by Panther Unified School District and displays the priority students that had core academic GPA's within a particular range during both their entire 7th grade school year and Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year. This data helps to understand the distribution of academic achievement of the priority students across more than one school year. Tables 2 indicated that many of the priority students had improved their academic performance from 7th grade to 8th grade; however, Table 3 provides more information about the entire graduating class of priority students and the academic performance they have shown over time. The data in Table 3 reveals that only 16% of the priority students had a 3.0 GPA or higher during both 7th grade and Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year. This shows that less than 25%

of the school's priority students have met one of the most important career and college readiness standards and that the performance of the priority students within the school is consistent with national averages of low academic achievement among disadvantaged students (Bodovski, 2010; Covay & Carbonara, 2010; DiMaggio, 1982; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Lareau, 1987).

Table 3. Priority students in GPA range during entire 7th grade school year and Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year

Core academic GPA range	Priority students within GPA range (n = 32)	Percentage of priority students within GPA range
0.75 – 1.5	5	10%
1.51 – 2.49	14	27%
2.5 – 2.99	5	10%
3.0 – 3.49	3	6%
3.5 – 4.0	5	10%

Table 4 shows that 16% of the priority students that participated within this study had a 3.0 GPA or higher during their 7th grade school year. Furthermore, 16% of the priority students that participated within this study had a GPA of 1.99 or lower during their 7th grade school year. Comparing the data in Table 4 to the data in Table 2, these statistics show that lower percentages of the priority students in both the 3.0 GPA or higher range and also the 1.99 GPA or lower range participated within this study. The data in Table 4 is consistent with the data presented in Tables 2 in which the priority students had a higher GPA during Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year when compared to their end-of-year 7th grade GPA. For the priority students that

participated within this study, 29% earned a 3.0 GPA or higher during Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year. Conversely, only 6% of the priority students that participated within this study earned a GPA of 1.99 or lower during Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year. Table 4 shows the complete academic distribution by GPA of the priority students that participated within this study during their 7th grade school year and Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year.

Table 4. Academic distribution of priority students that participated within this study by grade

Core academic GPA range	7th grade academic distribution: Number & percentage of priority students within GPA range (n = 29)	8th grade Qt. 1 academic distribution: Number & percentage of priority students within GPA range (n = 29)
1.0 or lower	3 – 6%	0
1.01 – 1.5	4 – 8%	2 – 4%
1.51 – 1.99	1 – 2%	1 – 2%
2.0 – 2.5	9 – 17%	9 – 17%
2.51 – 2.99	4 – 8%	2 – 4%
3.0 – 3.5	5 – 10%	11 – 21%
3.51 – 4.0	3 – 6%	4 – 8%

The data in Table 5 displays the number and overall percentage of the priority students that participated within this study that had core academic GPA's within a particular range during both their entire 7th grade school year and Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year. This data was important to gather to understand the distribution of academic achievement, as measured by GPA, of the priority students that participated within this study during more than one school year. Consistent with the data presented within Table 2 and Table 4, only a small number of the priority students that participated within this study met the 3.0 or higher GPA threshold and would be considered on track to be career and college ready when examining 7th and 8th grade

GPA's. Table 5 displays data that was collected on the GPA of the priority students that participated within this study during both their 7th and 8th grade school years.

Table 5. Priority students that participated within this study in GPA range during entire 7th grade school year and Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year

Core academic GPA range	Priority students within GPA range (n = 19)	Percentage of priority students within GPA range
0.75 – 1.5	2	4%
1.51 – 2.49	5	10%
2.5 – 2.99	3	4%
3.0 – 3.49	5	8%
3.5 – 4.0	4	6%

4.2 TEACHER INPUT

A teacher input group was held to gain information on the perceptions of the teachers of Panther Area Middle School in relationship to the academic performance and learning needs of the priority students. This step of the study ensured that qualitative data of teacher perceptions were gathered to assist in determining the performance level and learning needs of the priority students. Teacher input ensured that more perspective and depth on the academic performance of the priority students was gathered for understanding based on the perceptions of their teachers. This step of the study helped gain the perspective of the teachers on how the following issues

and academic concepts may influence the learning of the priority students within Panther Area Middle School: homework completion, test performance, teacher relationship with students, school behavior, student attendance, drug and/or alcohol concerns, peer group influence and other factors that may have factored into either the low or high performance of the priority students. See Section 3.4.2 of this dissertation for more information on the teacher participants and methods followed of the teacher input group (p. 39).

Tables 6 and 7 display the perceptions of the teachers of the priority students in relationship to literature based academic concepts. The perceptions gathered in Table 6 were gained through asking the teachers to focus on the priority students they believed had high levels of academic achievement in their class and then provide a short descriptor (if applicable) of their perceptions of the performance of these students that could be representative of the group of priority students they envisioned as high academic performers. These perceptions were gathered to compare the teachers' perceptions of the high performing priority students to their perceptions of the low performing priority students on literature based academic concepts. To stay consistent with the GPA data gathered within this study, the teachers were told to envision high performing students as those students they believed would have a 3.0 GPA or higher and envision low performing students as those students they believed would have a 2.5 GPA or lower. Table 6 displays the teachers' perceptions of the high performing priority students in relationship to literature based academic concepts.

Table 6. Teacher input on high performing priority students

Academic concept	Teacher descriptors
Homework completion	Excellent, Consistent, Focused, Quality
In-class effort & participation	Motivated, Hard-working, Driven, Overachievers
Test performance	Depends on student, Depends on preparation, Mostly good
Student strengths	Organized, Leaders, Class participation, Self-advocates, Good attendance, Articulate, Happy, Good self-esteem, Risk takers
Family academic involvement	High, Depends on student and family, Inconsistent
Teacher relationship w/students	Positive, Rewarding, Students would come to me for help, Neutral
Drug and/or alcohol concern	Yes, No [No descriptors provided]
School behavior	Great, Excellent, Focused, Respects adults
Student motivation	High, Respectful, Leaders
Student interests	Extracurricular activities, Arts, Sports, Typical kid

The teachers perceived many of the priority students they envisioned to be high performers to be motivated, consistent, respectful, hard-working, involved in school activities and talented. The teachers' perceptions of these students' strengths included descriptors such as

attendance, organization, self-advocacy and independent learners. The teachers also perceived the high performing priority students to be well-behaved in school, have parents that were at least minimally involved in the education of their children, and they recalled having positive and rewarding relationships with these students. When gathering teacher input, it was evident the priority students the teachers envisioned to be high performers were contributing to classrooms, consistently completing academic activities at a high level, acting appropriately in school and were connected to sports and/or extracurricular activities within the district. The perceptions of the teachers are supported within current literature that many students from disadvantaged backgrounds can and do perform at high levels in school (Broh, 2002; Killgo, 2010; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014).

The perceptions in Table 7 show the teachers' perspective on the priority students they believed to be low performing students in their class and their descriptions of these students' performance in relationship to the same literature based academic concepts. When compared to the students the teachers believed to be high performing students, the students they believed to be low performing students were described as inconsistent, unmotivated, prompt dependent, inconsistent, in need of rewards and consequences and generally lack parent involvement. Table 7 shows all of the perceptions and descriptors provided by the teachers on who they envisioned to be the low performing priority students.

Table 7. Teacher input on low performing priority students

Academic concept	Teacher descriptors
Homework completion	Inconsistent, Excuses, Unmotivated, Resistant, Unorganized
In-class effort & participation	Prompt dependent, Distracted, Low, Need to be creative to motivate, Bird walk (Needs direction)
Test performance	Varied, Inconsistent, Depends on topic, Low
Student strengths	Verbal, Personalities, Inquisitive, Dancers, Caring
Family academic involvement	Low, Non-existent, Parents not home, Prompt dependent
Teacher relationship w/students	Consequences, Rewards, Inconsistent, Needed socialization for student, Giving, Sports
Drug and/or alcohol concern	No, No, Maybe [No descriptors provided]
School behavior	Inconsistent, Attention seeking, Negligent, Lost, Doesn't care
Student motivation	Needs rewards, Needs consequences & feedback
Student interests	Sports, Boys, Pop culture, Gym, Video games

The teachers perceived the low performing priority students to have many difficulties and struggles within their class. A common academic activity within Panther Area Middle School is homework. In relationship to homework completion, the teachers perceived the low performing priority students to be inconsistent, full of excuses for why they do not complete homework, unmotivated to complete homework and generally resistant to completing any assignments outside of school. The teachers also perceived the performance of the low performing priority students to be inconsistent and low in relationship to in-class effort and participation and test performance. It was also perceived that these students generally have very little to no family academic involvement and support at home. The strengths of the low performing priority students were characterized through means of creativity and knowledge of pop culture; however, the teachers did not report the same level of satisfaction in terms of their relationship with the low performing priority students as they did with the high performing priority students. Through discussion of several of the academic concepts, it was noted by the teachers that some of the low performing priority students could and have experienced success after a series of consistent prompts, reminders and redirection in class. From the perspective of these teachers, the low performing priority students were more successful when prompts, reminders and redirection in class were used frequently and also rewards and consequences were given based on the students' level of responsiveness.

4.3 LEARNING INVENTORY ACTIVITY

A learning inventory activity was completed that asked participants to complete a “fishbone diagram” together to identify positive and negative factors that school, family and students may

contribute to the learning experience of the priority students. Fishbone diagrams have been used in educational research and practice to analyze problem issues as well as potential impacts and consequences of educational decisions and programs (Ellis, 2015). This study followed the methods outlined by Hewitt-Taylor (2012) in using a fishbone diagram to identify and analyze problems in practice. A learning inventory activity was completed by the following groups of participants: teacher group, low performing priority students (as measured by GPA), high performing priority students (as measured by GPA), district administration, and a parent group. For a more complete description of the steps and processes asked of participants when completing the learning inventory activity, see Section 3.4.3 of this dissertation (p. 37).

The results of the learning inventory activity are reported as group responses to protect the anonymity of the participants that were involved in this study. For each of the participant groups that completed this activity, tables are provided that show the exact responses of each group's coded descriptions for each area of the fishbone diagram. The remaining sections in Chapter 4 of this dissertation display the results of each participant group. Within each remaining subsection, results are described based on what the participants described on their sticky notes and discussed through their self-coding process. Individual sticky note responses are not provided in the exact words of the participants to maintain their anonymity; rather, the concepts the participants described are provided and reported as group responses. Due to the size of the school district and sensitivity of the subject matter that was discussed during each group's learning inventory activity, the process of converting individual responses into concepts was essential to protect participant anonymity. The tables within this section provide the coded responses that each group felt best explained all of the sticky notes within their self-identified coding bucket.

4.3.1 Teacher Group

The same teachers that completed the teacher input group of this study also completed the learning inventory activity together. For a description of these participants, see Section 3.4.2 (p. 39) of this dissertation. Each of the teachers that completed the learning inventory activity also taught every priority student that participated in this study. Because these teachers had direct teaching experience with the priority students, it was important to gain their perception of how each broad area in the learning inventory activity may impact student learning. The ten teachers that participated in the learning inventory activity represented exactly 28% of Panther Area Middle School's professional teaching staff at the time of this study.

Table 8 displays the coded responses the teacher group perceived may have a positive and/or negative impact on the learning of the priority students by broad area. Through the self-coding process, the teachers were able to identify perceptions that may contribute to the positive learning of the priority students. Within each area, the teachers felt that relationships were essential to the success of the priority students. Consistent with the literature identified within Section 2.6 of this dissertation (p. 22), every teacher mentioned the importance of the priority students forming positive relationships and having access to at least one adult within the school the child could trust and go to for support and guidance (Finn, Schrodtt, Witt, Elledge, Jernberg & Larson, 2009; Hattie, 2009; Marzano, Marzano & Pickering, 2003; Mikk, Krips, Saalik, & Kalk, 2016). The perceptions the teachers described largely identified that developing positive relationships with students may lead to improved levels of student happiness, mutual respect between teachers and students, grow and develop trust with students, and help teachers determine what students are good at and enjoy. In discussion, many of the teachers perceived their relationships with students as one of their favorite and most rewarding benefit of their job.

Consistent structure of rules and consequences and also rewards for behavior were described by many teachers as important for both the school and family to exhibit to children. The teacher group perceived that identifying and reinforcing skills and concepts such as classroom rules, respect, how to use an academic planner/agenda, and others, may help to reinforce pro-school behaviors and improve student learning. Many of the coded responses the teachers developed were also similar with the descriptors created during their input group. These responses included but are not limited to: student organization, parent involvement, student support systems, peer influence, etc. The importance of attending school regularly was mentioned by many of the teachers and was also coded as a student action that may have a positive impact on the learning of the priority students. The emphasis provided on regular school attendance is supported within current literature on college and career readiness preparation (American College Testing, 2015; Hein et al., 2013; National Forum on Education Statistics, 2015). During discussion of the self-coding process of this activity, many of the teachers felt that attendance was closely related to all of the student actions that may improve learning. Column two of Table 8 displays the coded responses of teacher perceptions of the factors that may have a positive impact on the learning of the priority students.

Column three of Table 8 displays the coded responses of teacher perceptions of factors that may have a negative impact on the learning of the priority students. The teachers perceived that a lack of resources at the school, family and student levels might have a negative impact on the learning of the priority students. Many of these resources, such as a lack of parent involvement, negative peer influences, reinforcement of unwanted behaviors at home and school, lack of academic motivation, and others, are closely related to the concepts mentioned within cultural capital theory, as described within Sections 2.2 and 2.3 of this dissertation (pp. 9-15). At

the school level, the teachers acknowledged that in instances when positive relationships are not formed with students, school staff might actually reinforce unwanted behaviors by not developing an appropriate support plan for the student. Many of the teacher responses indicated that unwanted behaviors might be reinforced through developing fixed mindsets within students, which they described as trapping students into believing that their intelligence can only reach certain levels and may define them as a person. The teachers also perceived disciplinary practices such as kicking students out of class and yelling or screaming at students to potentially give students motivation to misbehave. In these instances, the teachers perceived that some students enjoy getting to leave the classroom or enjoy showing off to their friends by making their teachers irritated or angry.

The teachers felt that once they were able to get to know their students and their likes and interests, they could develop plans of support if they were provided with the appropriate amount of time and resources to make the supports meaningful. However, within their individual sticky notes, almost all of the teachers identified support programs or staff positions that at one point used to exist within the district but were eliminated through what the teachers perceived as cost saving moves by administration. These positions and programs included literacy and remediation specialists, after school and summer programs for disadvantaged students, transportation for students to stay after school for tutoring or clubs and activities, and teaching positions that were cut and resulted in larger class sizes. Furthermore, the teachers believed that parents who may have a negative view of school and are not cooperative with school staff will not only inhibit student learning but could also lead to their children lacking motivation to earn positive grades and comply with the requests of teachers. Parent factors that were mentioned by many of the teachers as perceptions that may negatively impact student learning included actions

such as physical and emotional neglect (including lack of nutrition and nourishment), financial constraints at home, parent drug and/or alcohol use in front of children, and beliefs that education is the job of teachers and not parents. When describing student actions that may have a negative impact on learning, the teachers perceived that many students lacked or simply did not apply skills such as self-advocacy, motivation, executive functioning skills or focus on classroom learning. The teachers used words and phrases such as but not limited to the following to describe their perceptions of student actions that impede learning: unfocused, unable to organize time and self, lack of pride in student work, lack of social awareness, not active in sports or clubs, hanging out with the wrong crowd, does not complete in-class assignments, does not complete homework, and lack of a connection to any school based activities.

Table 8 displays a side-by-side comparison of the self-coded positive and negative responses of the teacher group for each area examined during the learning inventory activity. To compare the data in Table 8, it is beneficial to examine each area side-by-side to understand how the teacher group perceived potential positive and negative influences on the learning of the priority students. Table 8 displays that the teachers perceived both positive and negative influences on the learning of the priority students in relationship to all three areas examined during this study.

Table 8. Teacher learning inventory activity – self-coded perceptions of positive and negative influences on the learning of the priority students

Area	Positive Influences	Negative Influences
School	<p>Creative and innovative classrooms that give choices and provide motivators along with before and after school services and programs that interest children.</p> <p>Allowing students to have access to a trusting adult who facilitates a positive relationship.</p> <p>Clear consistent rules, expectations and tools to assist with organization.</p>	<p>School environment negatively reinforcing unwanted behaviors instead of having an appropriate support plan.</p> <p>Lack of appropriate time, resources, supports and meaningful assessments.</p> <p>Unsupportive administration which creates a community of failure and struggle.</p>
Family	<p>When parents are involved on every level, it provides a positive consistent base for students. Students work hard because they know that their parents will hold them accountable.</p> <p>Parent support is crucial to student success. Being a role model and putting learning as a priority in the home by providing rewards and boundaries. Parents must also provide the necessary school supplies, adequate sleep, predictable schedule, someone at home, and limit exposure to negative activities or influences.</p>	<p>Students whose families move frequently tend to struggle in school. Having to adjust multiple times to a new setting has a negative impact on learning.</p> <p>Parents who did not have a positive school experience do not want to be involved with the school. They may avoid phone calls or teacher contact. They may also be unable to help their children succeed because they do not have access to resources and/or not know how to help them. Parents who do not value education may pass that view of school to children.</p>

Table 8 (continued)

Family (continued)	<p>Parents who value learning and model making education a priority will have more successful students. Parents have positive discussions about school and explain why it is important. Parents put an emphasis on homework/classwork/grades and help their children to be successful on their assignments. Parents have had a positive school experience themselves and/or want their children to have a positive experience.</p>	<p>Students who experience a negative home environment will have that emotional response come into school. Parents who are focused on their own problems and do not provide the consistency in the home can adversely affect the student's learning process. Parents who are disadvantaged themselves do not have the resources or skills to advocate on behalf of their children.</p>
Student	<p>Organization provides students a pathway to success and to meeting expectations. Better organized students make better classroom leaders.</p> <p>Surrounding yourself with a positive support system (teachers, parents, friends, school employees, bus drivers, community) improves student learning. Better student learners tend to be more self-motivated and willing to go beyond what is expected by seeking help when needed to meet your goals.</p> <p>Regular attendance plays a role in student success. Attendance enables motivation and consistency in learning.</p>	<p>Struggling students are often uninvolved and tend to withdraw themselves from others. Students emulate peer group values. Therefore, hanging out with the “wrong” crowd has a negative impact on student learning. Involvement in unhealthy life choices results in unhealthy academic success.</p> <p>Lack of motivation typically results in lower grades with no thought given to tomorrow's opportunities or consequences. Low self-perception leads to a lack of social awareness, creating over-reliance on others instead of advocating for oneself.</p> <p>Unrealistic expectations for the future result in not being prepared to meet real world academic progress. Unable to organize time and self to complete a task from start to finish. Unable to complete tasks leads to low self-worth.</p>

4.3.2 Low performing priority students

A total of 29 of the 52 priority students in the graduating class of 2021 provided parental permission and student assent to participate within this study. In order to complete the learning inventory activity with a group of students that could be identified as low performing students and also have balanced student numbers between the high and low performing groups, all students that had a 7th grade GPA of 2.5 or lower and did not have an 8th grade GPA of 3.0 or higher were placed into a group and considered to be the low performing priority students that would complete the learning inventory activity. These GPA ranges were used to categorize the students as low performing priority students as each of these students fell below a 3.0 GPA during both school years examined during this study. With an emphasis placed on students earning a 3.0 GPA or higher for college and career readiness, these GPA ranges provided an indicator of low academic performance that is aligned to national and the district's expectations for students that may need support and focused assistance (American College Testing, 2015; College and Career Readiness and Success, 2013; National Forum on Education Statistics, 2015; Panther Unified School District, 2015). Twelve students met these GPA requirements that provided parent permission and assent and were present in school to participate in this study on the day the low performing priority students completed the learning inventory activity. The low performing priority group of students that participated in this study consisted of 8 male students and 4 female students.

Table 9 displays the perceptions of the lower performing priority students of the school, family and self-related factors that may contribute to positive learning experiences for them. These students strongly perceived that positive relationships within all three areas would help to

lead to improved learning for students. Within the school level, the low performing priority students perceived having a positive relationship with teachers as closely related to their own level of motivation and desire to do well in school. These students reported that their relationship with teachers was important to learning because they felt teachers would know through their relationship with students when to offer one-on-one support to students and would also improve student levels of motivation in order to impress teachers they like and respect. On many of the sticky notes, these students described what they perceived to be actions that build positive relationships between students and teachers to be those characterized by teachers that are chill and positive, nice and respectful to students, tolerant and understanding of when students may have a bad day, helpful with academic concepts, and provide one-on-one attention and support. The low performing priority students also perceived clubs and activities as an opportunity to get to know their teachers in a different manner and perceived their relationships to be strong with many of their teachers that are involved in coaching or leading a club or activity.

In relationship to their family, most of the low performing priority students reported a desire that their families would be more actively involved in supporting their academic needs. These students did not like when their parents would punish them for poor grades in school; however, they reported being frustrated that their families either did not know how to help them with homework or did not care to help them with any school-related work such as homework or help studying for tests. For most of their learning inventory activity, many of the low performing priority students had a difficult time identifying factors they perceived that their individual families contributed to positive learning experiences for them. Students from low SES backgrounds that do not have parents that are able to provide them with the amount of academic

support and attention they need is supported within the literature consulted within this dissertation (Bodovski, 2010; DiMaggio, 1982; Lareau, 1987). Through using the probing questions identified in Appendix B, these students identified a few family factors they perceived that may improve their learning. Their perceptions of these family factors included help with transportation to and from events and activities, help with homework completion, and encouragement to try their best and consider college in the future.

The low performing priority students were able to identify situations and factors they believed have hindered their learning in the past. These situations and factors included but were not limited to: not asking for help when they are confused, choosing friends with a negative view on school, and getting the appropriate amount of sleep each night instead of staying up to watch television or play video games. As was the case with family involvement, the low performing priority students wanted to focus more on the negative decisions students may make rather than the positive actions students do to improve their learning. Through the probing questions, these students were able to describe their perceptions that concepts such as self-advocacy, asking questions, getting adequate sleep, and breaking academic assignments into chunks or sections may help improve student learning. Many of the low performing priority students also perceived peer relationships to be closely related to academic success based on the academic orientation of the peer group. Column two of Table 9 displays the coded responses of the low performing priority students' perceptions of the factors that may have a positive impact on their learning.

Column three of Table 9 displays the coded responses the low performing priority students believed to have a potential negative impact on their learning. For each broad area, the lower performing priority students were able to identify three self-coded responses of actions that may potentially inhibit their learning. These perceptions will be analyzed in more detail in

Chapter 5 of this dissertation; however, it is important to note that the lower performing students self-identified many of their own actions through this activity that they desired to do a better job or had better circumstances in relationship to each area. At both the school and family levels, the low performing priority students felt that interactions with their teachers and parents that have resulted in yelling, screaming, and losing privileges have resulted in lower levels of motivation and learning in school. Of the 12 low performing priority students that participated within this study, 10 of them described on their sticky notes experiences with teachers that yelled at them and turned them off from trying their best in that teacher's class for extended periods of time. Nine of these students also described experiences in which their parents have taken privileges or personal items (phones, gaming systems, etc.) when they received poor grades and that these actions resulted in them having a bitter or angry attitude towards school or individual teachers as a result.

The low performing priority students also believed that excessive amounts of school work made learning feel over-whelming to them and that receiving low grades turns them off from learning and makes them disinterested in school. Within their own families, many of the low performing priority students also submitted sticky notes that described situations at home in which parents would fight with one another in front of them, that one or both of their parents were largely absent from their lives, and situations in which they felt the adults in their home environments did not care for their long term health and well-being needs. Many of the student level factors that were reported described situations in which these students regretted a particular action they committed at school at one point in time. These situations of regret included responses in which the students used profane or inappropriate language or gestures towards their

teachers or other school staff, became overly focused on improving their social life or purposely scored low on a test or assignment to appear to be disinterested in school to their peers.

Table 9 displays a side-by-side comparison of the self-coded positive and negative responses of the lower performing priority students for each area examined during the learning inventory activity. To compare the data in Table 9, it is beneficial to examine each area side-by-side to understand how the lower performing priority student group perceived potential positive and negative influences on their own learning. Table 9 displays that the low performing priority students perceived both positive and negative influences on their learning in relationship to all three areas examined during this study.

Table 9. Low performing priority students' learning inventory activity – Self-coded perceptions of positive and negative influences on their learning

Area	Positive Influences	Negative Influences
School	<p>Teachers that form good relationships with kids and motivate kids will get more out of most students. Teachers that are nice, show respect, don't yell and help you through stuff are the best to learn from.</p> <p>Clubs and activities like the FOR Club, elective classes and after school tutoring and counseling help students through difficult times.</p> <p>More focused and one-on-one support from teachers and other school staff helps us.</p>	<p>Teachers that have a negative impact on our learning usually yell too much, are too strict when we make a mistake or too confusing to follow in class.</p> <p>When classes give too much homework we are less likely to do good. Too much work outside of school brings grades down.</p> <p>Assigning bad grades makes us feel dumb and turns us off from school.</p>
Family	<p>Having families help you with all kinds of stuff; like homework and activities.</p> <p>For families to help students get into college one day.</p> <p>Overall, for our families to help us more with stuff like grades, homework, keeping us in line, helping us study and encouraging us.</p>	<p>When parents yell and mistreat children. That's just wrong. When they need help they should help their kids and treat them better.</p> <p>When parents take their kid's stuff as a punishment for doing bad in school. That just turns us off from school even more.</p> <p>When families fight with each other or a parent is no longer at home it lowers our motivation to try in school.</p>

Table 9 (continued)

<p>Student</p>	<p>Students need to ask for help more and need to want to do their homework and turn it in on time.</p> <p>Picking the right friends is important to make sure you are focused on school.</p> <p>Getting the right amount of sleep is important to make sure you are focused and ready for school and activities.</p>	<p>The notes are about wishing we didn't do something that we did at school. Examples are yelling at a teacher, getting in a fight with another student, getting suspended from school, and hanging out with bad kids.</p> <p>Staying up at night to play video games or watch TV makes us tired the next day in school and unable to concentrate.</p> <p>Not paying attention in class and talking to friends makes us get behind in class and earn bad grades.</p>
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4.3.3 High Performing Priority Students

The high performing priority students that participated in the learning inventory activity were composed of students that had a 2.51 GPA or higher during their 7th grade school year and also had a 3.0 or higher GPA during Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year. This GPA range was chosen to categorize these students as high performing priority students as they would have reached a 3.0 GPA or higher threshold at one point during either their 7th or 8th grade school year and could at that time be considered on track for college and career readiness. The group of 12 high performing priority students that completed this activity represented 53% of the priority students that met the aforementioned GPA criteria and were composed of seven female students and five male students. All 12 priority students provided parent permission and assent to participate in this study. Ensuring that the thoughts and ideas of the high performing priority students were gathered was important to gain knowledge on the perceptions of priority students within the district that have achieved academic success. The data gathered through secondary data analysis of these students' grades is consistent with existing literature that despite the challenges associated with coming from a low SES background, many students from these backgrounds can and do perform at high levels of academic achievement and attainment (Broh, 2002; Killgo, 2010; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014). Identifying some of the factors that support educational success for students from low SES backgrounds through their own perceptions of how schools, families and students contribute to positive and negative learning experiences was partially gained through the participation of the high performing priority students in the learning inventory activity.

Column two of Table 10 displays the high performing priority students' coded responses that may have a positive impact on their learning. The high performing priority students identified many factors they believed contribute to positive learning experiences for students. The perceptions of these students of many of these factors is consistent with the literature mentioned within Chapter 2 of this dissertation and includes ideas such as but not limited to: positive peer group association, positive adult role modeling at home, and extracurricular learning opportunities and experiences. The high performing priority students did not report the same level of importance and significance of having positive relationships with their teachers as the low performing priority students. Instead, the high performing students perceived school factors such as extracurricular activities, educational field trips, tutoring, the use of daily academic planners, and classroom activities to be important school-level factors that contribute to a positive learning experience for students. These students also valued family time that is spent helping them to prepare for tests, plan and be prepared for school each day, and parenting styles that are subtle in nature and understanding of setbacks and poor decisions to be beneficial to student learning.

The majority of the high performing priority students mentioned positive peer group association as an essential student factor that may contribute to high levels of learning for students. Through their sticky note responses, several of the high performing priority students mentioned that some students within their grade often misbehave in class and/or do not complete their academic work and that staying away from these students was important to their success. Many of the high performing priority students also identified on their sticky notes instances in which studying or completing homework with a peer may have been beneficial to their learning.

These students felt that having friends who are positive about school may improve the mood, happiness, organization and level of academic understanding for students.

Column three of Table 10 shows the high performing priority students self-coded responses of factors that may have a negative impact on their learning. When comparing Table 10 to Table 9 (completed by the lower performing priority students), there are both similarities and differences for each broad area. The high performing priority students spent more time describing negative peer relationships, that included items such as bullying and friends that do not take school seriously, when compared to the lower performing priority students. Conversely, the lower performing priority students spent more time talking about actions they regret and their negative perceptions of teachers that yell. The high performing priority students reported school-level factors almost exclusively as either bullying issues or negative experiences with a teacher. In regard to negative experiences with a teacher, the high performing priority students did perceive that when some teachers yell too much it may turn all students off from wanting to be in their class. The students also felt that some of their current teachers are or have been poor instructors and that if these teachers could improve their instructional practices then all students would benefit from an improved learning experience. The student responses that included poor instructional practices were almost exclusively focused on situations in which a teacher introduced a new academic concept to students and then directed students to independent practice of the concept before the students were ready and prepared to attempt problems on their own and were all described in relation Math or English Language Arts classes.

The concepts of transiency and of parents being a negative role model was mentioned by many of the high performing priority students. Within the group of students that completed this activity, two students self-identified to have switched schools three or more times in their lives

and one other student acknowledged to having switched schools twice. These transitions were described as being hard on the students and made learning difficult during their transition. Several other students within this group reported that their own parents or parents of their friends might be bad role models for them to follow. When describing these perceptions of bad parent role models, the high performing priority students felt negative experiences at home likely makes school success more difficult and has a negative impact on student motivation. Some of the negative experiences at home that were described by these students included parents that fight with each other in front of their children, parents that place the responsibility of home chores and helping with younger siblings on students, and parents that degrade their children by describing their intelligence or self-worth levels to be low.

The high performing priority students reported negative peer influences as an important perception that may make student learning more difficult. Eight of the students in this group reported experiences in which they or a friend have been persuaded by peers to do something at home or in school other than complete academic assignments or prepare for tests and projects. These students each acknowledged through their sticky notes or discussion that peer group influence could lower student grades if students do not attempt to make completing assignments an important priority. A few of the students also perceived that dating relationships have caused them to lose a large amount of their focus in school and on preparing for school at home.

Table 10 displays a side-by-side comparison of the self-coded perceptions of positive and negative responses of the high performing priority students for each area examined during the learning inventory activity. To compare the data in Table 10, it is beneficial to examine each area side-by-side to understand how the high performing priority student group perceived potential positive and negative influences on their own learning. Table 10 displays that the high

performing priority students perceived both positive and negative influences on their learning in relationship to all three areas examined during this study.

Table 10. High performing priority students' learning inventory activity – Self-coded perceptions of positive and negative influences

Area	Positive Influences	Negative Influences
School	<p>Students would like more educational field trips, and more after school activities because they motivate them to do well in school.</p> <p>There are many random things that make a positive impact on students while in school. Some of which are: planners, regular breaks during class, tutoring, and games and interesting activities in class.</p> <p>Providing teachers that are understanding and easygoing. They also help us to experience new things that we can now comprehend.</p>	<p>Bullying in school can have an awful effect on students. That can cause many mental disorders, common anxiety and depression.</p> <p>By yelling at students, teachers may cause them to lose self-confidence. Also, teachers make it so people don't want to go to classes.</p> <p>Teachers need to stop talking about personal things, and teach lessons. They also need to start explaining their lessons in ways we can understand.</p>
Family	<p>Family support helps kids in school by building their confidence and helps them make better choices.</p> <p>Parents that talk to students about their grades, how to study and prepare for tests, and what is going on in school helps us focus and be prepared for school.</p> <p>When parents spend time to do homework with their kids or call their teacher if they are confused it helps improve what we learn during school.</p>	<p>Changing schools may affect your grades because you do not know anybody and you need to start over and learn new things.</p> <p>Parents should be better role models for their kids. When parents act like school and learning are not important, kids will act the same way.</p>

Table 10 (continued)

Family (continued)		Punishing kids because they have a grade lower than a B is a main reason why kids might not be as motivated as others. If kids feel there may be punishment for lower grades it may scare them and cause anxiety.
Student	<p>Being positive and motivated about school helps you to want to learn. It also helps you get good grades. Students needs to understand the positive side of school.</p> <p>Having friends that are smart or do well in school helps you understand school work more. Your friends can help tutor you on stuff you don't understand.</p> <p>Being organized is important to do good in school. You need to know where your stuff is and what is due and going on in each of your classes.</p>	<p>When students do not believe in themselves or their ability to do good they will not be motivated to get the job done because they think they might not be right.</p> <p>Having friends who are bad influences can affect your grades in a bad way.</p> <p>When students do not put homework before friends and free time they get lower grades.</p>

4.3.4 District Administration

The educational administration of Panther Unified School District is composed of four building principals and two Central Office administrators. These administrators are tasked with managing the day-to-day operations within the district and for working in conjunction with the School Board of Education to set goals and priorities, review student and staff progress towards district initiatives, manage the financial planning and allocation of funds within the district and communicate to the district's stakeholders. For more information on the stakeholders within Panther Unified School District, see Section 3.2 (p. 33) of this dissertation. Along with a staff member that is partially responsible for administration over a specialty area within the district, all six of the district's educational administrators participated within this study. At the time of this study, the experiences of these administrators working within Panther Unified School District ranged from five months of experience to twenty-three years of experience. Four of the seven administrators have been in their current role for more than two academic school years and six of the seven administrators were men.

The district administrative team perceived factors such as parent engagement and communication with staff, positive relationships between students and staff, and school based structures and services to be potential positive influences on the learning of the priority students. The perceptions of all seven administrators included mention of some type of positive interaction between students and staff. These interactions were described as important to provide emotional support, feedback to individual and groups of students, compassion to students, positive role modeling and feedback on student academic assignments. School structures and services that were perceived to be important included tutoring services, small class sizes and mentoring

programs. District administration perceived these supports to be important to provide support to students that may need help that is not immediately recognizable to their teachers and to provide students with places to feel comfortable and safe. Elective classes were mentioned by a few administrators as important to engage students that may struggle in their core classes and to prepare students for future work and/or careers. Furthermore, alignment of K-12 curriculum goals and learning progressions was perceived as important so that students would experience gradual and supportive learning. Specific details on the nature of parent engagement and communication were limited to perceptions that students who come from engaged families that communicate with their school may perform better than those students that do not come from these backgrounds. The administrative team also felt that parents acting as positive role models are essential to student success. Examples of positive parent role modeling were described as showing that education is important and valued, spending time to talk to children about their school work, modeling the expectations that society deems to be appropriate and acceptable, and providing consistent academic and peer support and encouragement.

The administrative team perceived positive peer relationships and self-advocacy skills as important student level factors that may have a positive impact on learning. Of the seven administrators, five mentioned that peer relationships are often very influential on the learning of students. These administrators felt that positive peer relationships help students form good study habits, develop higher levels of a positive association with school and may lead to a positive academic orientation for individual students. Five of the administrators also perceived self-advocacy skills to be important towards positive student learning. These skills were described and discussed as knowing when to ask for help in class, knowing who to seek for help in situations that may be troubling for students/teenagers, establishing quiet places to study and

think, and knowing how to interact in a formal manner with adults. Column two of Table 11 displays the district administration's coded responses of their perceptions of factors that may have a positive impact on the learning of the priority students.

Many school, family and student level factors were described by the administrators as perceptions that may have a negative impact on student learning. These factors were self-coded into the responses that are shown in column three of Table 11. On the school level, the administrative group felt that the current culture of importance placed on high-stakes testing from the state and federal levels, cuts and losses of student and staff programs, and overlooking the social, emotional and mental health needs of students may have a negative impact on student learning. Four of the administrators perceived high-stakes testing as a process that helps students lose faith in their ability levels and/or add pressure to teachers that may take away from building positive relationships with all students. In relationship to the priority students, a few of the administrators felt that high-stakes tests, specifically the PSSA, may point out the effects of growing up in poverty but completely ignore and do nothing to address student needs that extend beyond the classroom or school. All seven administrators perceived that certain administrative actions and decisions might have a negative impact on student learning. These actions included cuts to programs and services due to financial constraints, lack of professional development opportunities and resources to provide to staff, and not placing enough emphasis on working with teachers inside of classrooms. Not providing enough attention to the social, emotional and/or mental health needs of students was also perceived by all seven administrators to possibly have a negative impact on student learning. The administrators described these needs as related to social media understanding and awareness for students, bullying issues within schools,

placement of students in alternative educational facilities, and not providing enough guidance and/or counseling related services.

Consistent with the perceptions reported by many of the other groups, the administrative team perceived both compromised and poor parent role modeling to have a negative impact on student learning. Perceptions in which parents had a poor school experience and lack trust of school staff was described by many of the administrators to possibly have a negative impact on student learning. The majority of the administrators also reported that students who come from single parent families or are raised by family members or guardians that are not biological parents often struggle in school when compared to students that come from two parent homes. Other perceptions that were reported in relationship to family impact included the importance of supervision, nutrition and care, and student encouragement. Finally, the administrative group was consistent with the perceptions of many of the other groups in they believed that negative peer relationships, characterized by poor emphasis of the group to do well in school and comply with school expectations and rules, often influence students to believe that school is not important to their future success. Several members of the administrative group mentioned that a lack of executive functioning skills, such as knowledge of how to move through common expectations associated with academic task completion, might often have a negative impact on the learning of the priority students.

Table 11 displays a side-by-side comparison of the self-coded perceptions of positive and negative responses of the district administration for each area examined during the learning inventory activity. To compare the data in Table 11, it is beneficial to examine each area side-by-side to understand how the district administrators perceived potential positive and negative influences on the learning of the priority students. Table 11 displays that district administration

perceived both positive and negative influences on the learning of the priority students in relationship to all three areas examined during this study.

Table 11. District administration learning inventory activity – Self-coded perceptions of positive and negative influences on the learning of priority students

Area	Positive Influences	Negative Influences
School	<p>Schools can provide/develop structures such as tutoring services, small class sizes, and mentoring programs that will help students be successful.</p> <p>Positive relationships between students and staff tends to support student academic achievement.</p> <p>Parent engagement and communication can have a positive impact on student achievement.</p>	<p>The emphasis on high-stakes testing has a negative impact on student success.</p> <p>Administrative actions/decisions can have a negative impact on student achievement.</p> <p>Schools that do not support the social/emotional/mental-health needs of students can negatively impact student success.</p>
Family	<p>Parent and school communication is essential for increasing the likelihood of student success.</p> <p>The family needs to stress that education is valued and model accordingly.</p>	<p>Compromised parent role modeling leads to poor/negative student behavior.</p> <p>Moving districts (schools) in the middle of the school year helps to create gaps in student achievement.</p> <p>Not supporting (creating a positive environment) and properly supervising a child at home helps to create/encourage undesirable behaviors.</p>

Table 11 (continued)

<p>Student</p>	<p>Students who self-advocate for themselves are more likely to experience academic success.</p> <p>Students are more likely to experience academic success if they are motivated to achieve goals that they believe in and created.</p> <p>Students that engage in positive and supportive friendships are more likely to experience academic success.</p>	<p>When students are not motivated to succeed, they have a difficult tie with academic demands.</p> <p>When students do not maintain positive relationships with peers or adults, they have a difficult time finding motivation to succeed.</p> <p>Student's negative behaviors impede their ability to learn.</p>
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4.3.5 District Parents

A total of seven parents participated in the learning inventory activity. These parents each had children that participated within this study and represented an even balance of family members of the high and low performing priority students. Of the seven parents that participated, six participants were female and one was male. The families that participated in the learning inventory activity represented almost an even balance of single and two parent families and were all either a mother or father of one of the students. Due to the size and demographics of Panther Area Middle School and the desire to protect research participant identity, further details and descriptions of the parents that completed the learning inventory activity will not be provided.

Tables 12 displays the coded responses of the parent participants of their perceptions of the school, family and student factors that may have a positive and negative impact on the learning of the priority students. The parents perceived teacher relationships and interactions with students to be very important to the learning of the priority students. Parent perceptions of teachers as a positive role model and their ability to have empathy for students were believed to be important teacher actions that may have a positive impact on student learning. On their sticky notes, six of the seven parent participants perceived teacher actions that let students know they are cared about as important school level actions that might improve student learning. Many of the parents also perceived the role of after school activities, such as clubs and sports, and elective classes to be opportunities for students to build a positive connection to their school.

Serving as a positive role model was perceived by the parent group to be an important factor that families must contribute towards positive learning experiences for students at school. Many of the parents believed that children often imitate their parents' actions and beliefs and

noted that time spent talking to their children about the importance of school and getting a good education likely leads to higher levels of motivation to do well in school for their children. Many of the parents perceived that acting as civil and caring adults would also likely lead to their children acting in the same manner in school. Among the remaining parent perceptions of how families might improve the learning experiences of children, many parents mentioned teacher communication and holding their children accountable for grades as important family level factors. While some of the parents felt that communication with teachers could be beneficial to help their children study at home, several others identified communication as important to make sure their children do not lie to them about having homework or upcoming tests and projects.

The three student factors the parents perceived to have the largest positive impact on student learning were positive student attendance, association with a positive peer group, and student self-organization skills. The parents believed that when students miss school, it becomes easy for them to fall behind in their classes and they may become too overwhelmed to catch up. All seven parent participants identified peer group association to have a potentially large influence on student learning. Within their responses, the parents believed their children's level of motivation to pay attention and do well in school is closely associated to their friend's behavior and attitudes toward school. Many of the parents felt that academically oriented friends could lead to improved school motivation for their children. Column two of Table 12 displays the district parents' coded responses that may have a positive impact on the learning of the priority students.

The parents felt equally as strong about the role teacher relationships may have on student learning when describing their perceptions of the school factors that may have a negative impact on the learning of students. All seven parents described situations in which they believed

a teacher attitude or behavior could have a negative impact on student learning. Within their response, some of the parents described situations in which teachers may allow disruptive student behaviors to occur in their classrooms without properly addressing or stopping the behaviors. These behaviors included situations of student bullying, students talking out loud during class or over the teacher's voice, and students that cause distractions for others students who may be trying to complete classwork. In these instances, the parents felt that the learning of many of the other students within the classroom may suffer. A few of the parents also mentioned situations in which their children were yelled at by a teacher or made to feel dumb by teacher comments or body language. In these situations, the parents felt their child was less inclined to do their best in those teachers' class. Another factor that all seven parents identified was the stress that their child faces and often feelings of lower self-esteem as a result of the PSSA Exam. Many of the parents felt that a few days of testing, such is the case with the PSSA Exams, do not accurately measure everything their child is capable of doing and understanding. In a few of the parent perceptions, it was described that their child received much lower than anticipated PSSA scores and their self-esteem was negatively impacted as a result. Other parents felt their children face a lot of unnecessary stress in the weeks leading to and during the PSSA Exam and that they were not able to fully focus on their remaining schoolwork as a result.

The parents of the priority students strongly perceived negative role modeling to be a major family factor that may have a strong and undesirable impact on student learning. All seven of the parents described situations or ideas in which they believed that a lack of parent involvement at home or in school or speaking poorly about teachers or education might have a negative impact on student learning. Over half of the parent participants felt that when parents make disparaging or inappropriate comments about teachers or learning then their children are

likely to repeat these same actions and get in trouble at school. Five of the parent participants also mentioned the negative effects that single parent homes may have on children. Several of the parents that participated in this activity either have been or are currently single parents. These parents perceived that children from single parent homes often lack parents that are involved in education, lack transportation for after school tutoring or activities, and may also lack proper nutrition and medical treatment due to parent time constraints. Finally, the parents felt that several children within the district come from destructive home environments in which parents may put children down through criticism or a lack of understanding for their child's emotional well-being. These parent perceptions focused on family actions that lack respect for children as valuable family members or situations in which adults may be mentally and/or physically aggressive towards their children.

While most of the parents felt that involvement in school sports or activities is important for a positive connection to the school, many of the parents also felt that children within the district often hold themselves back by not getting involved in activities or sports. These parents perceived that when children participate in after school activities or sports they have a feeling of being a part of something and feel more connected to their school. Many of the parents also described that children that do not participate in school activities or sports may often be more open to negative influences such as drugs and/or alcohol and negative peer group associations. Over half of the parent participants mentioned that they have been surprised the older their children get to learn about situations in which other students in their child's grade have started to use or experiment with drugs and/or alcohol. These parents perceived that a lack of engagement to positive activities outside of school, drug and/or alcohol use, and negative peer association, likely lead to a lack of school motivation for children. Column three of Table 12 displays the

district parents' coded responses that may have a negative impact on the learning of the priority students.

Table 12 displays a side-by-side comparison of the self-coded perceptions of positive and negative responses of the parents for each area examined during the learning inventory activity. To compare the data in Table 12, it is beneficial to examine each area side-by-side to understand how the parents perceived potential positive and negative influences on the learning of the priority students. Table 12 displays the parents' perceptions of both the positive and negative influences on the learning of the priority students in relationship to all three areas examined during this study.

Table 12. Parent learning inventory activity – Self-coded perceptions of positive and negative influences on the learning of the priority students

Area	Positive Influences	Negative Influences
School	<p>Learning organizational skills early will help students succeed throughout school.</p> <p>After school activities and programs help to keep students involved.</p> <p>When students have positive interactions with teachers, family and friends they will find school easy and fun.</p>	<p>High stake testing/PSSA's have a negative impact on learning and student self-esteem.</p> <p>Teachers attitudes and behaviors can have a negative impact upon student learning.</p> <p>Suspensions from school and a lack of resources can negatively impact student learning.</p>
Family	<p>Good parental role models give children life skills for learning. Positive praise gives children confidence to learn.</p> <p>Communication between parents and teachers is essential for student learning.</p> <p>Holding kids accountable to be prepared for tests by being organized and having good study skills improves student grades.</p>	<p>Parents that do not treat their children with respect and may degrade them at home will have a negative impact on their child's school success.</p> <p>Not having positive role models at home that value education may lead to students that do not care about or see the value in school.</p> <p>Students from single homes or disadvantaged families have to overcome bigger obstacles when they come to school in order to keep up with everyone else.</p>

Table 12 (continued)

<p>Student</p>	<p>Kids who are organized, on time and ready to learn set themselves up for greater success.</p> <p>Having friends who are good motivators and academically oriented can inspire a child to set high goals.</p> <p>It is important to have good attendance. Whey students are not in school, it is difficult to learn.</p>	<p>Drug/alcohol use and friends that consume drugs or alcohol will have a negative influence on student learning and grades.</p> <p>Students that use negative comments about themselves will have lower motivation and therefore lower grades.</p> <p>Students who do not have involvement in outside activities can feel left out and not connected to their school.</p>
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5.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The discussions and conclusions offered within this section are provided for each research question within this study. For each research question, this chapter offers a brief summary of the results of the study and analyzes these results in relationship to the literature available and consulted at the time of this study. The perceptions offered and described by the participants within this study's learning inventory activity inform much of the discussion within this chapter. Conclusions are drawn based on the findings from this study and the literature consulted on cultural capital theory and school, family and student factors that may have a positive and/or negative impact on student learning.

5.1 ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

5.1.1 Research Question 1: What is the distribution of academic achievement among the priority students at Panther Area Middle School? Amongst the priority students, which students consistently experience academic success and which students consistently struggle to achieve academic success?

Section 4.1 provides a snapshot of the distribution of academic achievement among the priority students within the Panther Unified School District graduating class of 2021. This study

identified that a large percentage of the priority students (up to 70%) may not be on track for college and career readiness standards; as indicated through student GPA (American College Testing, 2015; Hein et al., 2013; National Forum on Education Statistics, 2015). Using a 3.0 GPA or higher as a threshold, this study identified that only 30% of the priority students within this graduating class may be on track for college or career readiness. Of the 52 priority students in the graduating class of 2021, only 16 students earned a 3.0 or higher GPA during their 7th grade school year. These findings are supported through existing literature in that students from lower SES backgrounds consistently score well below national academic averages, including GPA (Bodovski, 2010; Covay & Carbonara, 2010; DiMaggio, 1982; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Lareau, 1987). When analyzing the priority students' GPA across their 7th and 8th grade school years, only 16% of the students earned a 3.0 or higher GPA during both school years. With far less than 25% of the priority students earning a 3.0 or higher GPA across more than one school year, the results of this study seem to suggest consistency with national tendencies in that family SES is one of the strongest and most accurate predictors of student academic achievement within the district (Barr, 2015; Lareau, 2015).

While the GPA and teacher perceptions of many of the priority students revealed academic difficulties, the findings from this study also reveal consistency with existing research that many students from low SES backgrounds can and do perform to high levels of academic success (Broh, 2002; Killgo, 2010; Tomlinson & Jarvis, 2014). Tables 2 and 3 display the complete academic distribution of all the priority students within the Panther Unified School District graduating class of 2021. Examining these tables, it is evident that many of the priority students have earned positive grades in middle school and that many of the priority students have shown growth from their end-of-year 7th grade GPA to their first quarter 8th grade GPA. At the

end of 7th grade, only 30% of the priority students earned a 3.0 or higher GPA. Conversely, 38% of the priority students had a first quarter 8th grade GPA of 3.0 or higher. Among the priority students that participated within this study, 16% of the students earned a 7th grade GPA of 3.0 or higher compared to an improvement of a total of 29% during the first quarter of their 8th grade school year.

To calculate student GPA, this study followed the steps described with the Panther Area Middle School Parent-Student Handbook of assigning numbers to a letter grade. The letter grades of a D and of an F were assigned number totals of one (D) and zero (F). A letter grade of a D was considered any grade between 60-69.49% and a letter grade of an F was considered any grade that was 59.49% or lower. All letter grades at Panther Area Middle School were rounded up to the nearest percent at .5% or higher for each whole number and displayed as such on student report cards. Therefore, students that earned a GPA of 1.0 or lower could be described as students that earned consistent grades of a D or an F. Using a 1.0 or lower GPA indicator, Table 2 displays that six of the 52 priority students earned consistent grades of a D or an F during their 7th grade school year. Table 2 displays that only one of the priority students had earned consistent grades of a D or of an F during Quarter 1 of their 8th grade school year. Among the priority students that participated within this study, Table 4 displays that only three students had a 1.0 or lower GPA during 7th grade and none of the students had a first quarter 8th grade GPA of 1.0 or lower.

A primary emphasis within this study was not only to understand the academic distribution among the priority students, but also to learn more of how issues of cultural capital theory may manifest amongst the priority students within the district. Cultural capital was defined in this study, based on Bourdieu and Passeron's (1979) interpretation, as key

dispositions, knowledge, skills and familiarity with how social institutions function that support advancement in society. Through identification of the academic achievement of the priority students and a teacher input group, perceptions were gathered from Panther Area Middle School teachers to help this study have a qualitative understanding of the academic achievement among the priority students. Teacher input and perceptions on the performance of the high and low performing priority students are described in relationship to academic concepts within Section 4.2 of this dissertation (p. 55). The teacher input provided in Table 7 seems to suggest that the low performing priority students may possess cultural capital that is not congruent with the expectations of the educators at Panther Area Middle School. These students were described as inconsistent, unmotivated, lacking academic passion or knowledge, distracted, and prompt dependent in relationship to the academic concepts of homework completion, in-class effort, test performance, and school behavior. The input and perceptions of the teachers on the low performing priority students and the 7th and 8th grade GPA's of these students suggests consistency with existing literature in that educators may reward students whose cultural capital is congruent with the expectations of the school system with higher grades and penalize those students whose cultural capital is not congruent with standard school expectations with lower grades (DiMaggio, 1982; Lareau, 1987, 2015; Lareau & Horvat, 1999).

Comparing and contrasting the teacher input and perceptions in Tables 6 and 7, it is evident the teachers perceived family academic involvement to be low or non-existent for the low performing priority students and higher and more effective with the high performing priority students. The extent of parent communication with teachers was described in many of the learning inventory activities in Chapter 4 and appears to have a positive relationship in this study between the grades of the high performing priority students and the communication between

their parents and teachers; based on the academic GPA of the high performing students and their teachers' description of parent communication that are described in Tables 2 and 6. This potential positive relationship between the high grades of some of the priority students and communication styles between their teachers and parents is supported within existing literature in that communication between parents and teachers may lead to improved learning outcomes for students from low SES backgrounds (DiMaggio, 1982; Lareau, 1987).

Personality factors, including but not limited to mood, work ethic, peer group association, self-esteem, and others, have been identified to have a relationship to student academic achievement (Holland & Andre, 1987). The academic achievement distribution within this study and the input and perceptions of the teachers and students seem to suggest that the high performing priority students were composed of students that could be considered leaders, positive influences within the school, have high levels of self-esteem and are effective risk takers. Many of the low achieving students were characterized by their teachers and/or themselves as lacking many of these personality factors that may have a positive relationship to academic achievement.

Since the release of the Coleman Report (1960), many studies have identified that academic achievement gaps between disadvantaged student groups and their peers are substantial and that students from low SES backgrounds score below national academic averages and struggle with the completion of daily academic assignments (as cited). The distribution of academic achievement within this study suggests that the majority of the priority students are not earning high grades and may be failing to remain on track for college and career readiness indicators. This study also suggests through improved first quarter 8th grade GPA's and teacher input that many of the priority students are capable of improving their academic performance.

However, a primary conclusion that may be drawn through the distribution of academic achievement among the priority students and the input and perceptions of their teachers would be that in order to continue to improve the performance of the priority students, initiatives and efforts must be implemented to address some of the skill and understanding deficits that exist between the high and low performing priority students. When the academic expectations of educators and students is closely aligned and understood, students may often be rewarded with higher grades and improved learning outcomes (DiMaggio, 1982; Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). The next section of this dissertation discusses the perceptions of both the low and high performing student groups on the school, family and student level factors that may have a positive and/or negative impact on their learning.

5.2 STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

5.2.1 Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of the priority students of the school, family and self-related factors that may contribute to a positive or negative impact on their learning?

The 24 priority students that completed the learning inventory activity represented almost 50% of the priority students within Panther Unified School District's graduating class of 2021. These students were an even split of high performing and low performing students, as measured according to student GPA, and consisted of 13 male and 11 female students. Their perceptions that were described in Chapter 4 came as a result of their participation in this study's learning inventory activity and were supported through the use of prompting questions (See Appendix B).

To the majority of students within both groups, the development and consistency of having positive relationships with adults and the influence of peer group associations were two themes that were described through their perceptions as factors that may have a positive and/or negative impact on their learning.

The low performing priority students described and discussed almost exclusively their relationships with teachers as the school-based influences they perceived to have a positive influence on their learning. These students' perceptions described the experience of positive relationships with their teachers as one of the main sources of motivation to do well in school, a prerequisite to teacher understanding of when to help them, and much of the necessary enrichment needed within their lives to help through difficult times or fulfill their needs to be connected to sports or activities in which they could be a member of a team. Positive relationships between teachers and students have been identified through research to have a positive correlation with student motivation, academic performance, classroom learning and positive school behavior (Finn et al., 2009; Hattie, 2009; Marzano et al., 2003; Mikk et al., 2016). Furthermore, the low performing priority students largely focused on negative interactions and/or relationships with teachers through their perceptions of the school-based influences they believed to have a negative impact on their learning. These students described situations in which teachers yelled at them and as a result they gave up in that teacher's class and situations in which they believed the teachers failed to understand their ability levels to complete large amounts of homework or classroom based activities in which they felt underprepared to finish. As a result of their failure to complete overwhelming amounts of school work or finish classroom activities, the low performing priority students felt their relationships with these teachers suffered. Through reflection of their perceptions of positive and negative experiences

with their teachers, the low performing priority students continued to mention one or two teachers by name that gave them hope and optimism and whose classroom they felt welcome, safe and important. The perceptions of the low performing students seem to suggest that forming a positive relationship with an individual teacher may have a positive impact on learning. As supported through the literature consulted within this dissertation, when students form at least one positive relationship with a teacher, it may have a positive impact on their learning and achievement (Good & Brophy, 1986; Marzano, 2003). Due to the name of one specific 8th grade teacher that continued to come up through the learning inventory activity as a bright and positive spot for almost all of the students within this study, it is not completely unreasonable to believe this teacher is at least partially responsible for the growth in student GPA's from the end of 7th grade through the first quarter of the priority students' 8th grade school year. While other factors including but not limited to physical and mental maturation of the students and teacher grading philosophies may also be responsible for this increase in achievement, it should be noted that 19 of the 24 priority students mentioned one specific 8th grade teacher by name as potentially having a large and positive impact on their learning and willingness to try in that teacher's class.

The high performing priority students emphasized adult relationships, but not to the extent with their teachers as the low performing priority students. To the high performing priority students, relationships were perceived to be more important at their family level than the school level. This is not to say that the high performing priority students did not mention specific teachers or teacher relationships that may have positively influenced their learning; rather, they perceived adult roles that nurture, support and provide guidance to have been coming from their parents. The school level actions the high performing priority students perceived to have a positive impact on their learning were enrichment opportunities, supporting services for

students, and instructional procedures performed by their teachers that improve understanding. Their emphasis on enrichment and instructional practices is supported through existing literature as school-based actions that may improve student learning (Hunter, 2004; Pollack, 2007). The responses of both the higher and lower performing priority students and their academic GPA's seem to suggest that some priority students within Panther Area Middle School may naturally come to school with knowledge and supports that enable a focus on learning while others come to school without and craving supports that are essential in order for learning to be maximized. It is not unreasonable to believe that many of the safety, belonging and esteem needs characterized through Maslow's (1943) hierarchy are inherently unequal between many of the high and low performing priority students within this school based on their perceptions in the learning inventory activity and academic GPA's. If this is indeed the case, this study suggests unequal and uneven levels of cultural capital between many of the students within the district. This study also suggests the high performing priority students may excel at the hidden curriculum of Panther Area Middle School, which is described by Lareau (2015) as knowledge of the "rules of the game" of how schools work, a sense of when and how to ask for help when facing difficulty, and an understanding of how to enrich their learning through social situations and institutions.

Through participation in the learning inventory activity, it was evident the high and low performing priority students had different perceptions of their experiences with their families and peer groups. These experiences were perceived to have an impact on concepts such as homework completion, test performance, ability to focus in school, parent communication with school staff, personality factors and student levels of satisfaction in learning. For the low performing priority students, family influence on learning was largely perceived as an added

bonus if help and support were offered but as a major consequence when they received low grades. Lack of family support for learning and academic activities among students from low SES backgrounds is supported within the current literature and was perceived by the low performing priority students to be largely absent (Crosnoe et al., 2002; Powell, 1991; Pilkauskas, 2014). For the high performing priority students, parent support and assistance with learning was perceived to have a positive influence on many academic and age appropriate constructs that are supported within the existing literature such as but not limited to help with confusing academic concepts, help preparing for tests and completing homework, promotion of positive life choices and school behavior, development of academic routine, academic persistency and stamina, and ability to not be influenced by negative peer associations (Broh, 2002; Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; Crosnoe et al., 2002; Holland & Andre, 1987; Jordan, 1999; Lareau, 1987, 2015). It was also evident through the student perceptions that the role of education being the teacher's job may likely be the perspective of many of the parents of the low performing priority students while many of the parents of the high performing priority students perceived education to be a mutual responsibility between parents and school staff. This view is supported through the teacher responses in Section 4.2 and through existing literature (Bodovski, 2010; Lareau, 1987).

Both student groups that participated within this study perceived peer group association as a student level factor that may have either a positive or negative impact on their learning. The low performing priority students had a difficult time identifying student level perceptions that may have a positive or negative impact on their learning; however, through the support of prompting questions many of them were able to identify situations in which they felt friends may have a negative impact on their learning. In many of these situations, the low performing

priority students described perceptions in which friends distracted them in class from focusing on their teachers or assignments or encouraged them to engage in social activities outside of school instead of completing homework or preparing for the next school day. Their perceptions seemed to suggest that their parents were largely absent or uninvolved in their lives to prevent them from engaging in friendships that could be potentially harmful to their learning. This is important to note as adolescent friendships that may promote deviant activities and/or non-school values have been found to have a strong and negative relationship to student learning and school behavior. Within the literature consulted for this dissertation, deviant friendships were often described as relationships that may encourage behavior that is not consistent with the norms and expectations of parents and school rules (Aseltine, 1995; Matsueda & Anderson, 1998). Conversely, the high performing priority students described many situations in which their perceptions supported positive peer group association as a primary student level factor that may improve learning. In their coded responses and general perceptions, they perceived having friends who are positive about school and academically talented to have a positive relationship with their mood at school, ability to concentrate in class, test preparation, and school organization. Their perceptions and the perceptions of others involved in this study seem to suggest that the parents of the high performing priority students have played a key role in discouraging deviant friendships and keeping their children focused on associating with peers that value their school accomplishments and future opportunities. This perspective is supported within existing literature (Jenkins, 1995; Crosnoe et al., 2002).

The perspectives of the priority students seem to suggest a need to develop opportunities for students to develop meaningful and trusting relationships with adults as a crucial element to support their learning. As early as the 1920s, programs have been implemented within American

schools to improve the behavior, learning and social concerns of students through connection with what could be deemed a positive adult role model (Koos, 1927). Advisory programs are one means to promote social and emotional development, develop trusting relationships between students and teachers, and provide an adult advocate for students (Cole, 1990; Thompson & Homestead, 2004). The results of this study suggest that the priority students within Panther Area Middle School would benefit from increased positive interactions with adults in their school and community. For many of the low performing priority students, Advisory opportunities may provide the adult connection, support and guidance they perceived to be lacking at home. For the high performing priority students, these opportunities may be used to improve extracurricular learning opportunities and also connect them to community partnerships and supports to strengthen their learning (Walsh et al., 2014).

5.3 PARENT PERCEPTIONS

5.3.1 Research Question 3: How do the parents of the priority students describe factors (see above) that may contribute to a positive or negative learning experience for their children?

Family SES has been identified through research as one of the strongest and most accurate predictors of student achievement and attainment (Barr, 2015; Lareau, 2015). Many of the large scale and smaller studies that were consulted in the review of literature within this dissertation have found a reciprocal relationship between family SES and student achievement and attainment (Barr, 2015; Bodovski, 2010; Coleman, 1966; DiMaggio, 1982; Eagle, 1989; Lareau,

2015; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Within these studies, family SES has been identified to have at least a minimal relationship with factors such as but not limited to student homework completion, time spent preparing for academic tasks, grades, relationships with school staff, performance on standardized tests, high school drop-out rates, college acceptance, and student confidence toward academic task completion. Within Panther Area Middle School, roughly 42-49% of the students could be considered as coming from a low SES background. Because of these factors, it was important to gather and learn more about the perceptions of the parents of the priority students of the school, family and student level factors that may have a positive and/or negative impact on the learning of their children.

The parents of the priority students perceived teacher relationships to be an important school level factor that may have either a positive or negative impact on their children's learning. Through the perceptions of the parents, the views expressed by many of the high and low performing priority students were evident in their parents' descriptions and discussion. Many of the parents perceived teacher relationships to have a positive relationship to student growth and maturation, social and emotional well-being, motivation and feeling of connectedness to their school. These perceptions were consistent with the descriptions of the low performing priority students. Furthermore, many of the parents perceived teacher relationships with their children to be important so that teachers were familiar enough with students to provide focused and student specific support, teach organizational skills, and encourage after school and extracurricular activities. For these parents, their perceptions were consistent with the descriptions of the high performing priority students. The perceptions of the parents of the value placed on positive adult interactions is consistent with each of the stakeholder groups that participated within this study and is supported by the research that has been consulted and identified through this dissertation

(as cited). These results seem to continue to suggest the need and value for Panther Area Middle School and other schools looking to improve the learning of students from low SES backgrounds to foster and implement opportunities for teachers and adult community leaders to have positive and consistent interactions with students.

The perceptions of the parents of the family level factors that may impact student learning seem to suggest the importance of supporting students with the “hidden curriculum” or “rules” of school in order to foster positive student learning. The hidden curriculum of schools was identified as the expectations of educators that students follow all classroom and school rules, give their best effort at all times, and ask for help when they do not understand what is being asked of them (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010). The parents perceived their communication with teachers as important when needing to support their children with confusing academic concepts or assignments. They also valued family time that is spent discussing and planning academic goals, supports student academic work ethic towards their goals, and supports respect for teachers. Within the perceptions described by the high performing priority students, many of the aforementioned parent perceptions were mentioned among the descriptions and discussions of the students. This study suggests that parents who spend time supporting their children with learning, communicating to their teachers, setting goals with their children and encouraging respect for teachers may develop cultural knowledge that supports their children’s advancement at the hidden curriculum of schools. The parents of the priority students also perceived situations for other students within the district in which one or more parents were uninvolved with their children or were not positive role models and they perceived those children to suffer in school as a result.

Peer group association and students' active level of contribution to their learning were the two student factors the parents of the priority students perceived to have positive and/or negative impacts on the learning of their children. While all seven parent participants perceived positive peer group association as supportive to the learning of their children, it should be noted that the parent participants were split in how much of a role they themselves believed they played in their children selecting peers to associate with what could be considered positive influences. The parents were also split in what should count as a "positive influence" among their children's peers. Many of the parents felt that associating with peers that strongly value school and education could improve their children's level of motivation to pay attention in class and academic orientation; however, some of the parents felt association with a variety of peers could also be beneficial to non-academic learning for their children. These results seem to suggest that while many of the parents believe they need to discourage deviant friendships, other parents within the district do not place as much value on ensuring their children are only associating with peers that place a positive value on education. The perceptions of the parents and input from both student groups could mean that the distribution of academic achievement of some students within Panther Area Middle School is partially due to uneven levels of parent monitoring of peer group association. Findings support the protective functions of parents over their children to discourage deviant and/or inappropriate school behavior through peer group association (Crosnoe et al., 2002).

Many of the parents also perceived students' active contribution to their learning, through organization, self-advocacy, and attendance, as important student factors that support learning. The parents that described or discussed these concepts saw their child as an active contributor to their learning and felt through regular school attendance and asking for help with difficult

learning tasks their children could have a positive learning experience. This view was not described by all of the parents that participated within this study, but it was also not disputed by the other parents either. Due to the importance of children actively contributing to their learning and the perceptions of their parents that their contribution is necessary towards a positive learning experience, this study suggests that schools and school leaders need to consider opportunities and ways in which they may teach and reinforce to their students self-advocacy and organizational skills (Gottfried et al., 1998; Powell, 1991).

5.4 SCHOOL STAFF PERCEPTIONS

5.4.1 Research Question 4: How do teachers, administrators and other school staff describe factors (see above) that may contribute to a positive or negative learning experience for the priority students?

The perceptions of the teachers, administrators and other school staff within Panther Unified School District were consistent with many of the participants in this study in that forming and maintaining positive relationships between teachers and students dominated many of the descriptions and discussions offered within their learning inventory activity. The teaching staff and district administrators described many support and care behaviors that may improve student learning through positive relationships with teachers. These behaviors are supported within the current literature and included time spent listening to students, providing students with one-on-one support and guidance, teachers being positive role models for students, day-to-day school encouragement, teacher kindness and compassion towards students, and providing every student

with an adult advocate within their school (Mikk et al., 2016; Raufelder et al., 2016). Both the Panther Area Middle School teachers and district administrators felt that significant consequences could occur in situations where an understanding of student and staff needs is not present through a lack of building relationships. The teachers perceived that school staff may reinforce unwanted behaviors in situations where not enough is known about students to develop appropriate support plans. Their descriptions of these unwanted behaviors included the reinforcement of fixed mindsets within students and disciplinary practices that remove students from their classroom. Likewise, the district administration described administrative actions that have resulted in programs that have been cut and not fully understanding the professional development needs of their staff [in relationship to student strengths and needs] may have a negative impact on student learning. These results seem to indicate that professional development opportunities for both teachers and administrators should minimally seek to provide guidance on the pivotal role of forming relationships with students that support academic growth and also develop teacher instructional strategies that consider the strengths and needs of a school's students. The perceptions of the high performing priority students of instructional practices having a potential positive and/or negative impact on their learning is supported within the current literature and was also mentioned by the district's teachers and administrators to be connected to how well staff understand their students' needs (Hunter, 2004; Pollack, 2007). Based on this research and the available literature, it could be assumed that administrators and teachers can improve the quality and meaningfulness of their professional development through improving their relationships with the students within their school.

The perceptions of the teachers and actual academic distribution of the priority students seem to suggest that conflicting beliefs and expectations for appropriate school behavior and

academic engagement occur within Panther Area Middle School between the teaching staff and many of the priority students. The teachers perceived that a clear system of rules, expectations, and consequences for rules violations were necessary for students to have a positive learning experience. The teachers also perceived rewards for positive behavior to be essential school level actions to improve the learning of the priority students. These views are supported within existing literature (DiMaggio, 1982; Lareau, 1987; U.S. Department of Education, 2008). However, much of the literature consulted for this study and the perceptions of many of the other participants suggests that many of the priority students simply lack the cultural capital to understand standard school expectations and may be penalized through lower grades as a result of their attitudes and behavior (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993; DiMaggio, 1982; Holland & Andre, 1987; Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; McDonough, 1997; Panther Unified School District). These conflicting perspectives merit further research in order to understand and learn more of how to bridge this gap between potential teacher attitudes and mindsets and the dispositions and attitudes of many students from low SES backgrounds.

The administrative group held strong perceptions in relationship to the potential negative impact of high-stakes testing, specifically the PSSA Exam, and of the impact of having to cut school programs that support students due to financial constraints. A limitation to this study would be that it does not specifically address the impact that standardized testing may have on students and that it largely does not investigate how district and state level financial budgets may impact student learning. Many of the administrators felt the PSSA Exam points out the effects of growing up in poverty and low performance of school districts that have large percentages of financially disadvantaged families; however, they also strongly felt that the PSSA Exam does nothing to address or fix these issues. Community SES has been identified as a major

contributor to academic achievement gaps between poor and minority children and other children from more financially advantaged backgrounds (Coleman, 1966). The perceptions of the administrative group merit further investigation into how the results of high-stakes tests may be used to support communities and school districts that could use additional supports and programs for their students and staff.

Both the district administrators and Panther Area Middle School teachers perceived family involvement and support in the education of children as essential for improved learning for the priority students. The emphasis that both group's placed on parents being positive role models for their children suggests that further inquiry into what constitutes a positive parent role model is necessary. Through the literature consulted within this dissertation and the perceptions of the teachers and administrators, this study suggests that parents who are positive role models communicate frequently and in a professional manner with teachers, hold their children accountable for school work and performance, understand their child's ability levels and do not push them beyond what they are capable, spend time talking to their children about the value of education, supervise their children and discourage deviant peer associations, encourage student active contribution to their learning, and stress and model accordingly that education is valued and important (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979; Crosnoe et al., 2002; Gottfredson, 1987; Gottfried et al., 1994; Grolnick et al., 2009; Jenkins, 1995). The perceptions of the teachers and district administrators described situations in which students that move frequently, lack supervision and support at home, have less than both biological parents living at home, or have parents that had a negative school experience may not have these parent supports. In these instances, it could be assumed that knowing and understanding each individual student's family situation may help

school staff provide necessary supports that some students from low SES backgrounds may be lacking upon entry to school or at any point in their K-12 educational careers.

Through his examination of the *grandes ecoles* and in *The Inheritors*, Pierre Bourdieu made claims that the social and cultural resources of a child's family life shape academic success in that neutral academic standards are often laden with specific cultural class resources acquired at home. The perceptions of the district administrators and Panther Area Middle School teachers described many student level factors that simply were not perceived to be important by many of the priority students. These student factors included but were not limited to regular school attendance, surrounding yourself with a positive support system at home, in the community and in school, self-organization systems that emphasize teacher expectations and assignments, and self-advocacy skills. If students from higher class backgrounds do indeed enter school with key social and cultural cues in these areas that most students from working or lower class backgrounds do not possess, then educational systems will likely reproduce the structure of cultural capital of the dominant social class within its society (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1979; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). It is recommended that school systems and leaders, institutes of higher education, and state and federal departments of education investigate and invest time and resources into programs that support the development of these student factors if they wish to close the achievement gap for students from low SES backgrounds.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Although it cannot be assumed the data from this study can be generalized to other schools and to school, family and student level factors in different districts, this study sparks interesting and practical suggestions for schools and practitioners towards identifying and understanding factors that may improve the learning experiences of students from low SES backgrounds. The implications, recommendations and conclusions offered in this section are based on existing literature and the perceptions and understandings gathered through the inquiry methods within this study. It is recommended that further research be conducted to expand on the findings of this study and applicability of suggestions across different contexts and settings.

6.1 IMPLICATIONS

The data and perceptions gathered through this study imply that many of the priority students within Panther Area Middle School are or may be struggling to perform to high levels of academic achievement. At the conclusion of their 7th grade school year, only 30% of the priority students within the graduating class of 2021 earned an academic GPA of 3.0 or higher. Likewise, 34% of the priority students had an academic GPA less than a 2.0 and 57% had an academic GPA of 2.5 or lower. It should be noted however that the priority students did exhibit growth as an entire graduating class in the number of students that improved their academic

GPA's when comparing end-of-year 7th grade GPA to their first quarter 8th grade GPA. This study also identified many inconsistent expectations for student behavior and academic engagement from the perceptions of teachers, parents and the priority students. Much of the research consulted within this dissertation supports the claim that students from low SES backgrounds and their parents may have different and often conflicting expectations when compared to their teachers' expectations for concepts such as student behavior, parent and teacher communication, and academic engagement (as cited). These differences often contribute to the way teachers view students and form expectations, assign grades and communicate with parents, and in turn how students employ their own intellectual resources to meet standard school expectations (Bourdieu, 1986; Meo, 2011). The results of this study suggest consistency with prior research in supporting these claims. A majority of the priority students at Panther Area Middle School perceived their expectations and experiences in a different manner than their teachers and other school staff in relationship to school, family and student factors that may lead to positive learning experiences. This divide between many of the priority students, their parents and the staff at Panther Unified School District may be part of the reason that a large amount of the priority students are not currently on track for academic indicators of college and career readiness.

The low performing priority students had a difficult time identifying and understanding what supports at the school level may help improve their performance. They also could not fully comprehend what they could do to improve their performance or who they could go to improve academically. This indicates an inability to act as a self-change agent and that many of the priority students may not have a positive advocate in life (parents, staff, friends, or community). With a lack of cultural capital to self-advocate for themselves and in many instances no deep

positive connection to an adult, many of the priority students within this school district and other similar districts may be haphazardly working their way through school systems and social situations in a manner that is likely not supportive of their long-term well-being. Despite these difficulties, many of the low performing priority students within this study expressed a desire to improve and at least a minimal connection and admiration for one of their current or former teachers. Their 8th grade GPA's also provide some evidence that they may be able to improve their grades. For the priority students within the Panther Unified School District graduating class of 2021, this study seems to suggest potential benefits for having an adult advocate within their school that can support the development of pro-school values that many of them were unable to identify as conducive to learning. Educational advocates are occasionally employed by families in K-12 public schools in situations in which students with special education needs may not be receiving the level of support they need to succeed. At the college and university level, first generation college students as well as many minority and other students that may need focused assistance are often offered classes and programs to support their adjustment to college and pathway to degree completion. For the priority students, having someone to advocate on their behalf could lead to the development of skills and school level supports that are necessary to improve their learning. While guidance counselors may fill some of the voids identified within this study for the priority students, it is likely that an “all hands on deck” approach by a larger majority of a school's staff may be needed to support the learning needs of many priority students. A major implication and consideration from this study would therefore be the manner in which schools may support and assign staff members to students of a high priority (for reasons that could extend to academic, attendance, social-emotional, etc.) to support their development and growth in relationship to a variety of school-based indicators.

The perceptions of many of the priority students' teachers suggest that these students have a difficult time following basic expectations and fully and successfully completing academic work. The teachers also perceived many of their parents to be unsupportive or uninvolved in teaching and reinforcing standard expectations. Every group that was involved in this study and almost every participant mentioned the importance of developing and maintaining positive relationships between teachers and students. These relationships were described as important to ensuring the successful growth and maturation of all students, not just the priority students. The parent, district administration and teacher groups also perceived high-stakes testing, specifically the PSSA Exam, and financial constraints that cut programs as major barriers to the time and resources needed to build quality relationships with students and programs for students that are supportive of learning. Another implication from this study is that school leaders and practitioners must understand the academic and social-emotional needs of students from low SES backgrounds and be committed to using relationships and relationship building activities and programs as prioritized school-level actions that may improve the learning of students from low SES backgrounds. Without training and an understanding of how research and practice have identified that the thoughts, dispositions and attitudes of students from low SES backgrounds and teachers may conflict, it is possible that school staff will not fully understand how their relationships with students may be used to improve student learning outcomes. With an improved understanding of these issues, school staff may leverage their own and community resources to support advocacy and the development of skills for students from low SES backgrounds. They may also enact and develop the ability of students to act as change agents for themselves.

6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

This research informs scholarly practice as it suggests that schools and practitioners need to provide more than “lip service” to the notion that relationships matter in education. Scholarly literature and professional practice indicate that the development and maintenance of positive relationships between students and teachers may have a strong and positive impact on student learning; however, state-level mandates and school-level programs often do not focus on relationship building initiatives. The perceptions of almost all of the stakeholders involved in this study identified that positive relationships between students and teachers may be one of the most important factors to improve student learning and that through these relationships students from low SES backgrounds may develop skills that support their advancement in schools and society. This study suggests that many students from low SES backgrounds lack these relationships at home and may come to school to seek adult guidance and support; however, due to misunderstandings between some students and their teachers they may not be receiving the proper connection that they need.

It is recommended that school leaders invest in professional development that helps teachers understand many of the challenges that are often associated with working with students from low SES backgrounds. Teachers should understand what cultural capital is, how it may be formed as a result of family and community background characteristics, and what it means for how students may act and behave in school and for their level of academic engagement. They should also understand that students from low SES backgrounds may have levels of cultural capital that manifest in school settings in manners of non-compliance with basic behavioral expectations, heightened propensity to be influenced by peers in a way that may not support learning, increased likelihood of not completing standard academic assignments including but

not limited to work outside of the classroom, lack of executive functioning skills, lack of parent support and proper role-modeling at home, failure to understand how to self-advocate for oneself, lack of school organization and academic orientation, moments of hopelessness and low self-esteem, inability to understand how to improve negative experiences with peers and teachers, experiences in which students display disrespect for school staff, and a strong need for one-on-one support and the experience of academic success on daily assignments. Teachers should also understand that despite these circumstances, many students from low SES backgrounds can and do have positive school experiences and that the performance of students that are not experiencing success may be improved through positive relationships with peers and adults (as cited).

Based on the school, family and peer experiences of each student, it is highly likely that the needs of students from low SES backgrounds are vastly different and cannot solely be improved through positive relationships with their teachers. However, programs and enrichment opportunities that invest in relationship building between students and staff and professional development that seeks to support both teachers and principals with understanding the unique needs often associated with students from low SES backgrounds may improve the learning experiences of many students. Recommendations for professional practice should include not only professional development in these areas for practitioners but also the development of research based and school-specific intervention protocols for improving the performance of students from low SES backgrounds. Scholarly research and the results of this study indicate that a student's level of cultural capital may be improved through focused initiatives and will likely result in a variety of student experiences and behaviors that educators may need to address to improve learning outcomes for all students. Through the creation of intervention protocols

and professional development that provide educators with a variety of concepts and areas to examine when considering how to improve student achievement and/or behavior, schools and practitioners can identify student areas to focus for improvement that are research based and aligned to local expectations and context. Many of these academic and/or behavior areas have been identified through the research and literature provided within this study. Implications for future research should include manners in which school staff and community leaders may act as advocates for the needs and desires of students from low SES backgrounds. This study has taken steps towards identifying factors these students may need support to advance their learning; however, further research is needed to determine how adult advocacy can be supported and strengthened to improve the learning experiences of many students from low SES backgrounds.

6.3 CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study and the processes which were involved to complete it strongly indicate that students need positive and supportive relationships with adults in order to maximize their learning potential. Cultural capital theory, as defined through Bourdieu and Passeron's interpretation, suggests that student learning is at least minimally if not significantly impacted by factors that are outside of student control. These factors include the family and/or families a student is born into and where their parents decide to live. A major conclusion from this study and the experience of this practitioner would be that schools and school leaders often overlook these crucial understandings when determining how to improve student achievement and how to close the achievement gap between students and schools from low SES backgrounds and those that may be more financially privileged. While it is believed that many teachers and school

leaders believe that positive relationships with students are important to school success, this study suggests that many educational practitioners lack a complete understanding of how cultural capital may impact student experiences and as some result the relationships that are needed to improve student learning are not developed to their fullest extent. For schools to improve the performance of students from low SES backgrounds, teachers and school leaders need a more thorough understanding of the factors that may impact the learning of these students.

This study has been a fun and rewarding process to complete largely due to the interactions and experiences in working with the primary stakeholders involved in this problem of practice. The perspectives gained and perceptions offered within this study have provided qualitative enrichment on a primary focus area within education in improving the achievement gap between students from low SES backgrounds and their peers from more advantaged backgrounds. This achievement gap has been statistically documented and analyzed since the release of the Coleman Report (1960) for students from low SES backgrounds. It is my deeply held belief that through an improved understanding of the factors associated with learning among students from low SES backgrounds and efforts and initiatives that focus on improving relationships between students and teachers, schools may improve student achievement and educators will continue to find their work more and more rewarding each day.

APPENDIX A

PARENT PERMISSION LETTER



University of Pittsburgh

*School of Education
Department of Administrative and Policy Studies
Collaborative for Evaluation and Assessment Capacity*

4316 Wesley W. Posvar Hall
230 South Bouquet Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15260
412-648-7171
Fax: 412-648-1784

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Study title: Cultural capital and academic achievement: A mixed methods study on the perceptions of students, families and school staff of three broad areas that may impact student learning during middle school.

Frank A. Hernandez
Principal Investigator

Greetings,

I am requesting permission to allow your child to participate in a research study that I am conducting at Panther Area Middle School (pseudonym). I have most recently served as the middle school principal at Panther Area Middle School and worked within the Panther Unified School District for over nine years. Since leaving Panther Area this past August, I have been planning a research project on broad factors that may impact student learning during middle school and I would like to request permission for your child to participate. Please review this form, contact me directly or the provided contact at the University of Pittsburgh with any questions or concerns and consider signing to allow your child to participate.

Figure 4. Parent Permission Letter

Figure 4 (continued)

My research is being completed to learn more about the school, family and self-related factors that may have a positive and/or negative relationship with student learning as students transition from middle to high school within Panther Unified School District. This study requires students to work together in a small group to complete a learning inventory activity. This activity will ask students to identify broad factors that may contribute to a positive and/or negative learning experience for them during middle school and then categorize their responses together into three categories. I will also need to review student grade point averages to make a determination of your child's level of academic success throughout middle school and gain input from their teachers on their performance on tests, participation in class, homework completion and overall level of cooperation with their teacher. Grade point averages and teacher input are needed to gain a more complete understanding of student performance in school. Due to a need to maintain two small groups (10 or under) to complete the learning inventory activity, your child may not be selected to participate in the learning inventory activity. If your child is not selected to participate in this activity, the information consulted about your child from their grades and teacher input will only be used to learn more about the level of performance of students within Panther Area Middle School. The learning inventory activity will be explained in terms that middle school children can understand and your child will participate only if he or she is willing to do so. At the conclusion of this study, responses and information about grade point averages and teacher input will be reported only as group results and at no point in time will your child's name or individual responses be shared in the publication or presentation of findings from this study. It is my goal to take the ideas that we learn through completion of this study and report them back to teachers and administrators within the district to consider as they develop curriculum, lessons, assessments and student interventions.

Description of Learning Inventory Activity

The learning inventory activity will begin with students being provided with a verbal and written definition of learning. Within the context of this study, learning will be identified as not only the accumulation of academic knowledge but also as improved understanding of how to successfully navigate through social situations and school (i.e. the ability to work with others as a member of a group and the ability to enable resources within schools to support student needs). A fishbone diagram will be drawn on a large, 4'x6' poster paper and each student will receive sticky notes to identify their own thoughts in relation to how they believe students learn best. Students will then be asked to identify and briefly describe on their sticky notes at least three ideas that may have a positive or negative association with their learning. Students will complete this portion of the learning inventory activity by themselves and without communicating to one another. Once the students have placed their sticky notes on the fishbone diagram, they will be led through a coding process that will ask them to group all of their responses into three categories that best match their individual response with the responses of other students. Finally, students will work together to create a short description that their group feels accurately summarizes their thoughts in relation to each category. The learning inventory activity will take place within Panther Area Middle School and take no more than one hour to complete. Students will complete this activity during their Study Hall and/or Advisory period and be provided a complimentary lunch for their participation. This activity will take place within 30 days of you providing your written consent to the middle school office.

Participation within this study:

Please know that participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect the services normally provided to your child by Panther Unified School District. Even if you give your permission for your child to participate, your child is free to refuse to participate. If your child agrees to participate, he or she is free to end participation at any time. I am also searching for parent participants to complete the learning inventory activity as a group. Your child will receive a separate letter following your consent to provide to you regarding when the parent group will complete this activity.

Participation risk and confidentiality:

This activity involves minimal risk to you and your children as no names or statements will be used in any professional writing or presentation of results that comes from this study nor will this activity be video or audio recorded. You and your children are also free to stop your participation at any time. Confidentiality will be maintained through these means and by only reporting the results of this study as a group description such as teacher group, student group, administrator group or parent group. All student grades will be safely coded to replace the student name where data is stored with a code and the completed fishbone diagram will be safely and securely stored in a locked safe until all results have been analyzed and data will be retained for 7 years, according to University of Pittsburgh policy. The diagram and all student data will then be destroyed. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. If the researchers learn that you or someone with whom you are involved is in serious danger of harm, they will need to inform the appropriate agencies as required by Pennsylvania law. Authorized representatives from the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office may review data solely for the purpose of monitoring the conduct of this study. As the Principal Investigator of this study, I will be the only person outside of the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office that has access to any of this data. Participation in this study does not have any direct benefit to you or your child.

Should you have any questions or desire further information, please email me at fah15@pitt.edu. You have been given two copies of this letter. One is for your record and the other needs returned to the middle school office with your signature within the next week if you permit your child to participate.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to talk to someone other than myself, please call the University of Pittsburgh Human Subjects Protection Advocate toll-free at 866-212-2668.

PARENTAL PERMISSION

The information on the previous pages about this study have been explained to me and all of my current questions have been answered. I understand that I am encouraged to ask questions about any aspect of this research study during the course of this study, and that such future questions will be answered by a qualified individual or by the investigator listed on the first page of this consent document at the telephone number given. I understand that I may always request that my questions, concerns or complaints be addressed by the listed investigator.

I understand that I may contact the Human Subjects Protection Advocate of the IRB Office, University of Pittsburgh (1-866-212-2668) to discuss problems, concerns, and questions; obtain information; offer input; or discuss situations in the event that the research team is unavailable.

A copy of this consent form will be given to me/my child.

Printed Name of Child-Subject

I understand that, as a minor (age less than 18 years), the above-named child is not permitted to participate in this research study without my consent. Therefore, by signing this form, I give my consent for his/her participation in this research study.

Parent's or Guardian's Name (Print)

Relationship to Participant (Child)

Parent or Guardian Signature

Date

CHILD ASSENT

This research has been explained to me, and I agree to participate.

Signature of Child-Subject

Date

INVESTIGATOR CERTIFICATION:

I certify that I have explained the nature and purpose of this research study to the above-named individual(s), and I have discussed the potential benefits and possible risks of study participation. Any questions the individual(s) have about this study have been answered, and we will always be available to address future questions, concerns or complaints as they arise. I further certify that no research component of this protocol was begun until after this consent form was signed.

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

Role in Research Study

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

Sincerely,

Frank A. Hernandez
School of Education
University of Pittsburgh
Principal Investigator
fah15@pitt.edu



University Of Pittsburgh
Institutional Review Board

Approval Date: 1/6/2017
Renewal Date: 1/5/ 2018

IRB #: PRO16110284

APPENDIX B

PROMPTING QUESTIONS

Learning Inventory Activity Guiding Questions

Cultural capital and academic achievement: A mixed methods study on the perceptions of students, families and school staff of three broad areas that may impact student learning during middle school.

Frank A. Hernandez
Principal Investigator

School

- + How do teacher relationships w/students have a positive impact on learning?
- + Does requiring a student to use a planner help improve their learning?
- + Do elective classes motivate students to come to school?
- + How do Guidance Counselors have a positive impact on student learning?
- + Are after school programs important to student learning?

- Does yelling at students form a bad relationship with them?
- Does discipline that takes a student out of class have a negative impact on their learning?
- Do high stakes tests, such as the PSSA, cause students and/or teachers to cast judgements about their ability level?
- When students underperform, should schools find something to get them involved in?
- Are academic remediation efforts used in all of your classrooms?

Family

- + Does family support at home have a positive impact on learning?
- + Is parent communication with teachers beneficial for students?
- + When parents review grades with their children, does it help improve student learning?
- + When parents help students prepare for tests or their school day, does it help improve student learning?
- + Do you believe there is any relationship between being a good role model as a parent and student learning? If so, what does this mean to you?

- When students have a parent that you would consider to be a bad role model, does the student usually perform poorly in school?
- Do you believe that some parents in this district call their children stupid at home?
- Do you believe there are children in this district that do not receive proper nutrition at home and have parents that closely monitor their medical needs?
- When students move between districts, does it have a negative impact on learning?
- Are students from single parent family at a disadvantage for learning?

Self

- + Are students that are motivated to do good in school better learners?
- + Do you think that students that are very organized typically earn good grades?
- + Does having friends that are academically oriented have a positive relationship with learning?
- + Do you believe that students who have good attendance typically earn good grades?
- + Do all students understand that you should ask for help when you do not understand something?

- Does low student motivation typically result in lower grades?
- Do the friends that students choose often have a negative impact on their learning?
- Do many students in this district withdraw themselves from others?
- Are there students that are struggling in this district that are not involved in any extra-curricular activities and/or sports?
- Do student drug and/or alcohol decisions inhibit learning in this district?

APPENDIX C

VERBAL SCRIPT

Verbal Consent Script – Learning Inventory Activity

The following script was read to the teachers, parents and administrators at Panther Unified School District that participated in this study's Learning Inventory Activity:

Hello, and thank you for attending our meeting for today's Learning Inventory Activity. I am going to read you a script that explains the activity that we will complete, potential risks and benefits, how confidentiality will be maintained, and outlines our work today. You may ask any questions you have after I have finished reading this script and I will then ask for your verbal permission to participate in our learning inventory activity.

As a group, we will complete a fishbone diagram that asks you to identify factors that you believe may impact student learning in middle school. This research is being completed to learn more about the school, family and self-related factors that may have a positive and/or negative relationship to student learning during middle school. This activity will take approximately one hour to complete and the results from our activity may be used to benefit research in the area of factors that may have a positive and/or negative relationship with student learning during middle school and possibly learn more about the factors that have a positive and/or negative relationship with the learning of students within this district. You have been identified for participation in this study as you are either currently working at Panther Area Middle School (pseudonym), have a child that attends Panther Area Middle School, or are a Panther Unified School District

administrator. To complete our activity, you will first work by yourself to identify up to twenty ideas that you believe may have a positive and/or negative relationship to the learning of students at Panther Area Middle School. Next, you will work as a group to identify what you believe are positive or negative factors that are associated with family, school, and yourself that contribute to the learning of Panther Area Middle School students. Finally, you will work as a group to take your ideas and group them into three categories per factor on our learning inventory activity. This activity involves minimal risk to you and your students as no names or statements will be used in any professional writing or presentation of results that comes from this study nor will this activity be video or audio recorded. You are also free to stop your participation at any time. Confidentiality will be maintained through the means previously described and by only reporting the results of this activity as a group description such as teacher group, administrator group or parent group. Our completed fishbone diagram will be safely and securely stored in a locked safe until all results have been analyzed and all data will be retained for 7 years, according to University of Pittsburgh policy. Authorized representatives from the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office may review your data solely for the purpose of monitoring the conduct of this study. The diagram will then be destroyed following this period of time. It is my goal to take some of the ideas that we identify today and report them back to teachers and administrators within the district to consider as they develop curriculum, lessons and student interventions. Any insight that is gained that shows a strong pattern in each group will be reported to the district as a factor to consider when working with students within the district. There are no direct benefits for you through your participation in this study.

Before we move forward, I need your verbal consent to participate. By providing your verbal consent, you acknowledge that I just described the previously mentioned information to you and have answered all of your questions regarding this activity and that you understand your participation in this study is voluntary. You are encouraged to ask questions and voice your concerns and acknowledge that future questions, concerns or complaints will be answered by myself or you can contact the Human Subjects Protection Advocate at the University of Pittsburgh's IRB office, phone number 1.866.212.2668. Please let me know if you have any questions before we begin.

My name is Frank A. Hernandez and I am the Principal Investigator in this study and my contact email is fah15@pitt.edu.

Next step – Ask each individual for verbal consent to participate.

APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL LETTER



University of Pittsburgh *Institutional Review Board*

3500 Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 383-1480
(412) 383-1508 (fax)
<http://www.irb.pitt.edu>

Memorandum

To: Frank Hernandez ,

From: IRB Office

Date: 1/6/2017

IRB#: [PRO16110284](#)

Subject: Cultural capital and academic achievement: A mixed methods study on the perceptions of students, families and school staff of three broad areas that may impact student learning during middle school.

The University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the above referenced study by the expedited review procedure authorized under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. Your research study was approved under:

45 CFR 46.110.(5)

45 CFR 46.110.(7)

The IRB has approved the waiver for the requirement to obtain a written informed consent for adult learning activity.

This study has been approved under 45 CFR 46.404 for the inclusion of children. The IRB has determined that the written permission of one parent is sufficient.

The risk level designation is Minimal Risk.

Approval Date: 1/6/2017

Expiration Date: 1/5/2018

For studies being conducted in UPMC facilities, no clinical activities can be undertaken by investigators until they have received approval from the UPMC Fiscal Review Office.

Please note that it is the investigator's responsibility to report to the IRB any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others [see 45 CFR 46.103(b)(5) and 21 CFR 56.108(b)]. Refer to the IRB Policy and Procedure Manual regarding the reporting requirements for unanticipated problems which include, but are not limited to, adverse events. If you have any questions about this process, please contact the Adverse Events Coordinator at 412-383-1480.

The protocol and consent forms, along with a brief progress report must be resubmitted at least one month prior to the renewal date noted above as required by FWA00006790 (University of Pittsburgh), FWA00006735 (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center), FWA00000600 (Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh), FWA00003567 (Magee-Womens Health Corporation), FWA00003338 (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Cancer Institute).

Please be advised that your research study may be audited periodically by the University of Pittsburgh Research Conduct and Compliance Office.

Figure 5. IRB Approval Letter

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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